

ESSAYS TOWARDS  
DEMOCRATIC  
IMAGINATION

Design ~ and ~ Democracy



# Design and Democracy: 50 Years, 50 Arguments.

..... Rita Assoreira Almendra

This is a personal reflection on the evolution of the Design field over the past 50 years in Portugal, mainly on its role in the context of Portuguese democracy and its contribution towards the well-being of people and the planet.

Design is ideological. Inherently implicated politically and socially, Design materializes and dematerializes worldviews, not always responsibly and ethically, not always with quality and decency, but it is strongly believed that it does so better in a democracy than in any other political system. As with any discipline involved in constructing the artificial world, it must be equally committed to the natural world, to humans and non-humans, in seeking well-being that encompasses the whole, not just the parts. This has not been the case so far. However, the awareness of this need, and its expression, manifestation, and imposition, are now increasingly evident in global democracies. This is also true in Portugal, a country that has experienced democracy for 50 years, a period in which Design has grown and is maturing.

From a gaze uncommitted to “historical fact” and committed to the “perception of a time”, Portuguese Design has experienced two major moments in these fifty years: first, when the voices and work of notable designers were heard and established with joy, conviction, and freedom; second, when the discipline gained institutional dimension supported by a network of schools that in 2023, according to DGES data, offered 60 undergraduate programs with 2610 entries in this first cycle, and 59 master’s programs and 8 doctoral programs.

This is how it often is with young disciplines: first, someone establish themselves and affirm the quality and relevance of their work, and then others join, learn from “the masters,” and a collective, expressing a consolidated reality, emerges. This collective has two expressions that need to be distinguished:

- Designers who have dedicated themselves and continue to dedicate themselves to having a voice and a firm educational space in higher education,
- Designers in the market, seeking recognition that has been and continues to be delayed for both.

As a collective, this body of designers has not unequivocally established itself in these 50 years. In fact, all efforts to organize into professional associations and consolidate through

interface institutions between Academia and Markets (such as the case of the Portuguese Design Center) had some years of apparent dynamism and even some societal impact, but in the last 15 years (for example, the CPD discontinued its activities in May 2013), its expression is minimal, if not nonexistent.

Despite everything, it was possible in 2007 to establish a specific CAE (Economic Activity Code) for Design activity (74100 – Design Activities), which allowed the creation of companies in the sector in Portugal, the code 1336 for the profession of designer was created in the IRS Code (art. 151), and the code 2456 – Designers was included in the National Classification of Professions (CNP) managed by the IEFPP (Institute of Employment and Professional Training).

A mere 17 years ago, the Portuguese state recognized the sector and its professionals. However, as often happens, and almost always in the Portuguese context, from recognition to the actual understanding and credit given to this “new profession,” the path is long, far from “a walk in the park,” but also distant from “a rugged mountain trail.” We need to de-dramatize but sharpen our gaze and activate our and others’ consciousness, promoting a high ethical commitment and responsibility in teaching, practices, and in our relationships with others and the planet.

Indeed, Design suffers from the “growing pains” of many other knowledge areas, especially the more recent ones. We are talking about organic growth, both in society and in companies; growth in a context where, as Lynda Stone (2019, p. 143) notes, “Worldwide these are dangerous times for democracy.” In this sense, reaching 50 years of democracy in Portugal, it is crucial to question how Design schools and designers can respond to the challenges facing our and other democracies.

These challenges involve the capacity of all of us—students, teachers, designers, citizens—to recognize the ethical deficit in our society and to contribute effectively to a healthy citizenship through our convictions and actions. I return to the beginning: Design is ideological and it is believed that it produces more effective transformations in the well-being of people and the planet in a democratic regime... but if democracy is weakened, then there is an even greater need for an intelligent and informed Design action.

As seminal Dewey (1916/1944, p. 87) advocated, “democracy is more than a form of government: it is primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience.” Assuming this perspective, it is necessary to ensure that democratic values, but especially habits, are disseminated in teaching-learning processes and in the daily practice of the profession.

Design education in Portugal, in this sense, generally shows signs of maturity, given the daily alarms that democracy is in a bad moment. Numerous actions are already visible

(both at the level of curricular content, as well as at the selection of themes worked on in master's dissertations and doctoral theses, in internship contexts, and in the research being produced in Portugal) revealing a citizenship involved in making sense of the world, in working towards possible better worlds, collectively, collaboratively, inclusively, and empathetically.

On the other hand, while it is up to governments, institutions, and companies to define change policies, both teaching agents and professional Design practitioners must commit to the complex construction of these policies, and simultaneously urge and inspire each and all in the defense of freedom and justice, through a fair, regenerative, restitutive, and democratic Design teaching and practice.

The path is not easy, considering that all processes involve choices, and those choices are made by people. An inclusion process also carries exclusion in itself, any process promoting freedom always runs the risk of fostering thoughts and actions that undermine democratic values and practices. What can Design and its people do about this then?

I would say that it is imperative to work on the literacy of all generations concerning the role and contribution of Design in shaping new realities based on democratic values. To do it in a way that is honorable and not pamphleteering, systemic and profound, resisting opportunisms and trends of all kinds.

I also highlight the condition that designing is having power, which means being responsible, hence ethically committed to the respect, decency, and depth that the complexity of current problems presents and demands.

Finally, I believe it is crucial both in teaching and Design practice to cultivate the use of curious and non-judgmental experimentation, positive and open collaboration, as ways of investing in democratic thinking and practices. It is essential to ensure, in this post-truth era, which so confuses civic thought, erodes citizens' trust in institutions and the very production of knowledge, and makes it difficult to distinguish between facts and opinions, that Design works diligently and wisely to reinforce and strengthen the values and practices of Democracy.



# Intersections between design and politics, and not all of them desirable: an abbreviated historical reflection towards a decipherment of contemporary challenges.

..... Heitor Alvelos

The dynamics between design and politics aren't new, particularly as politics have long been a territory of idealisation (utopia) and ideation (strategy), and their tangible and narratable rendering - pretty much a designer's job description if we ever manage to agree upon one. The recognition of these dynamics, however, require the acknowledgment that design as an activity has actually long preceded the formalisation of the profession, let alone the discipline. Whichever way we look at it - visualisation, inspiration, functionality, structure, metaphor, identity, iconicity - these have been human needs throughout the times, and all involve a design component when coming into effect. It is therefore with this premise that the current essay looks for ways in which design may be enmeshed in current political and ideological phenomena, while resorting to ontological and epistemological patterns in order to substantiate this scrutiny. The commonalities between design and politics thus become particularly relevant in the present times when, on one

hand, designers have invested so much on the honourability of their activity, and on the other, when politics seem to be facing a rapid, perplexing dissolution of the post-WW2 investment on the safeguarding of democracy and diplomatic resolutions.

### **Transgression as Transaction**

It has become quite a cliché to comment on the perverse semantic paradox of online social media. Once hailed as a prospective space for wisdom and affection, it has somehow largely led us into the opposite: a hyper-complex web of cathartic trenches exhibiting quite a few of humankind's worst traits, from addiction to aggression, from conspiracies to self-righteousness. Maybe we underestimated the need for editorial filters (and ultimately, the pressing need for a pedagogy of active, individual content filtering), but the paradox remains: if the individual has the inalienable right to express themselves (and they do), how do we reconcile that right with the abyss that is the undoing of an infra-structural, narrative commonality?

The progressively accessible means for online self-expression paved the way for the “self as a brand” phenomenon, with a corresponding shift from the semantic to the algorithmic. As posited by Klein (2023), whereas the brand was once a symbol of stability, trust and reliability referring to a product or service, it is now a volatile, digital *doppelgänger* of the self, perpetually vibrating in a self-sustaining anxiety of protagonism. Much has been debated on the phenomenon, including the tragic irony of a figurative return to the roots of the “brand” term itself. Beyond this evidence, however, I suggest a focus on the *means* to attain this protagonism - in other words, *how the self designs itself* in this process of self-branding. In this respect, as shock tactics seem to work quite effectively for the average influencer as far as notoriety goes, the brand of the politician has gradually shifted from the mythological idealisation of humane virtue to one of sheer omnipresence at all costs. “All costs”, in this case, not only reinforces the transactional component of the branded self: it signals the magic trick of semantic reversion, whereby transgression replaces virtue as the signifier of transcendence. The Trump arrest mugshot going viral, worn as a badge of honour by his supporters, printed and sold on coffee mugs, illustrates this perplexity. More recently, the sale of bourbon shot glasses branded “Trump assassination attempt: a Shot for America”. From the transcendent to the trivial, from the transgressive to the banal. Online trends that involve faking symptoms of illnesses and broadcasting psychotic episodes would do as well as meta-symptoms in themselves, but let's stick to a more tangible manifestation of the political. Ultimately, Trump is a variation of the historical pattern that has always placed the singularity at the center of the political narrative; he just happens to be the “chaotic negative” nemesis of the benevolent archetype. For better and for worse, charisma has too often been a trait of disfunction.

### **A Lexicon of Hallucination**

Berardi (2012) signalled the dispossession of our lexica, refashioned into the language of abstract transactions, words hovering above their original, tangible roots - the crisis of

imagination a symptom of the inability to transcend this language of transaction. As far as design goes, the same may be observed in regards to visual lexica, and the perverse tendency for dominant semantics and aesthetics in spite of a stunning hypothetical range of possibilities for expression. Yes, a given *zeitgeist* has always carried its own style, its own *habitus*, but what we now see is a discourse on the totality of self-expression versus the practice of its own impoverished act. The perversion tends to be semantic as well: a narrative of blissful euphoria becomes somehow oppressive by the omnipresence of the anodyne, the dutiful absence of rupture: no wonder the “chaotic negative” rises as a brutal whiplash.

The current, novelty-driven euphoria of artificial intelligence has, of course, pushed the above conundrums into further unknowns. If so far the documentary image as reliable proof of the real is on the brink of the collapse, our relationship with the real itself has already changed profoundly. On one hand, because a consensus around truth is becoming a matter of statistics rather than factual verifiability; on the other, because of our eager anticipation of the magic trick in which AI generates such a convincing semblance of reality, we gladly go along with the hallucination. Yes, design has always addressed the subjective; but how will design handle the collapse of *perception*? Moreover, how is a social contract even possible if the reliability facts, documents and sources is increasingly blurred?

Interestingly, the anodyne, the chaotic and the hallucinatory - all seem to fundamentally echo one another as reflexes: they ultimately point towards cycles of addiction, as documented nowadays by analyses our dynamics with digital media - and own empirical knowledge, in all truth. Compulsive online conflict, the bliss of overexposure, the uncanny vertigo of AI: can design provide a roadmap towards a seemingly impossible sobriety?

### **Disinformation Design**

The above evidently converges in the current vortex of disinformation and conspiracism, with enormous repercussions in geo-politics including the destabilisation of the fundamentals of democracy. Ironically or not, the empowerment of fringe and radical ideologies has been occurring largely by an efficient employment of media and design tools we, perhaps naively, took for granted as stable and benevolent. Stuck in the allure of enlightenment while social media grew exponentially, we may have prematurely deemed TikTok and the like irrelevant, and underestimated how readily available the tools for mimicry of enlightenment have become. A tangible example: certain radical political movements are producing social media memes copying the design of existing, credible newspapers in order to trick the reader into source reliability. This is a design problem, and yet we seem to have no idea how to tackle it beyond some fuzzy legal territory that will take time to even begin to legislate on “innovative” phenomena at their current pace. While expressive, this appropriation of editorial designs is certainly not the only design perversion at work: infographics can represent outlandish concepts, theories and ideologies, and as long as they look professional, they will persuade. The tools for professionalism are there,

and rightfully so; what do we, as designers, intend to do in regards to this further paradox?

### **So... what about democracy?**

It stems from the above that I am not particularly optimistic at the moment. I often read words and ideals that have either become brands or at the very least been pushed into ambivalence, if not emptied of meaning altogether by force of an alluring cynicism. Why do we speak of “democratisation” of technology, when we mean “accessibility”? Furthermore, have street demonstrations ceased to be effective as a mechanism of change because of online activism, a sort of ethereal wishful thinking that displays a rightful semblance of virtue and little else? Are we indeed willing to live with less - and would that scarcity include ridding ourselves of the current overproduction and overexposure of sensory stimuli?

Part of the challenge design faces has to do with the fact that all dialogues currently take place under an assumption of conflict - which goes a long way in explaining the exponential rise of regulatory measures and protocol where once common sense sufficed. Core words become central to the point of cliché, and invariably end up expressing their own opposite: “future”, “sustainability” and “creativity” seem to have been doing little else beyond engaging in self-referencing loops. Meanwhile, on a strictly technical perspective (and I underline this), one could acknowledge (and learn from) actual creativity sprouting from the lexica of new extremist phenomena: “Plandemic”, “Sheeple”, “QAnon”, “Soycialism”, “Libtards”, “MAGA”... Cognitive equivocation and crass hostility aside: how’s that for efficient branding?

And yet, at every given dialogue of its time, there are also words that vanish, seemingly overtaken, useless, pointless. I argue that those are the words to look out for, as they invariably convey what has been missing as far as ideals, behaviours and practices are concerned. I propose that a key missing word right now is “courtesy”, and propose that one of design’s current core missions is to help, not its simple lexical inscription, but its *practical viability*. A pedagogy of courtesy as an antidote to the “hostile” as the current habitus. Once a matter of mass mobilisation, the “Revolution” may now have to become a subject of wise discretion. Maybe, just maybe, a subject of intimacy.

# Digital totalitarianism

..... João Batalheiro Ferreira

One day, I was at an ATM retrieving cash. As you know, the machine takes a while to process a request, and I began noticing how the screen ran advertisements during those intervals. It's the same at gas pump terminals or self-checkout kiosks. During those moments, we are helpless captive audiences for the depressing little show some marketing team concocted together.

Like the fish in David Foster Wallace's famous story<sup>1</sup>, I started to notice this **everywhere**. Giant screens run ads during the halftime break of sports events, where, again, we're captive audiences. It used to be the case that during halftime fans lamented their team's lacklustre performance, in a wonderful example of collective commiseration. These days, unfortunately, the volume is so loud you can't even hear yourself think (and when you do, it's to ponder on the quality of Fly Emirates' aeroplanes or if you should buy a new car.)

At some subway stations, you can't take the train without first passing through a tunnel of screens running a nightmarish loop of ads. The waiting room at my dentist has a flat-screen facing every row of chairs. And so on and so forth. In fact, I challenge you to spend a day without once staring at a screen. It's impossible<sup>2</sup>.

It appears that the whole point of modern society is to capture and monetise every single bit of attention we have left. And *attention*, ladies and gentlemen, is scarce. Now, of course, we've developed ways to tune this out. You can, for instance, wear earbuds and bury your face on your smartphone, your own black monolith from hell<sup>3</sup>. But that's like jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. There is no escape.

1 Let me paraphrase the story: there are two fish swimming along and they meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two fish swim on for a bit, until one of them says "What the hell is water?"

2 There are exceptions. Philosopher Michael Crawford points out how, in the business lounge at large international airports **silence** is king—silence in a broad sense of no advertising, no TVs, and no screens. The lounge is soundproof. The stressful cacophony of the airport is shut out. The new privileges of the elites are silence, solitude, and disengagement. One can only wonder how many marketing executives came up with their campaign ideas while sitting silently inside the business lounge.

3 Have you noticed how uncanny the resemblance between a smartphone and Kubrick's monolith from 2001: A Space Odyssey? The key scenes in the film are marked by the appearance of a sinister monolith—a slick vertical slab with a reflective black surface. Sounds familiar? By the way, in the book that inspired the film the monolith was activated by human touch.

Public space has been captured by faceless multinationals whose messages are powered by shiny digital screens appearing everywhere, like poisonous mushrooms emerging from the undergrowth. This is a frontal attack on individual freedom. The freedom not to be bothered, the freedom to let one's attention drift where it will. It's also an ignominious attack on shared public life. And without a shared public life and a shared experience in the public space, there is no democracy. In the 20th century, one of the first things totalitarian governments did was to ban public gatherings. These days it's much easier. You can be outside as much as you want as long as you're staring at a stupid screen.

The total penetration of public space by attention-stealing technologies directs us away from each other towards a fabricated reality—a dystopia of consumerism and infinite distraction<sup>4</sup>. The erosion of shared public experience has consequences for democracy. Our public life diminishes as our digital existence increases. In the digital dystopia, we're atomised, isolated, hyperdistracted, and buried in increasingly warped political trenches.

To what extent was this disgraceful state of affairs *designed*?

There's an insightful book called "Addiction by Design" by Natasha Schüll. The book explores the intersection of technology, design, and addiction, focusing on electronic gambling machines in Las Vegas. Schüll explains how slot machines are designed to exploit human psychology, keeping people spending money for as long as possible. She discusses how the allure of these machines goes beyond mere chance, tapping into the deep-seated human desire for escapism. She describes a depressing picture of the addictive nature of these machines and raises questions about the ethics of their design and regulation.

Well, it appears that a few geniuses in Silicon Valley decided to interpret Natasha's book as a manual. Tristan Harris and James Williams, both former members of the Valley elite, have since repented and written about how social media companies learned from Las Vegas casinos to make their feeds more addictive.

Like electronic gambling machines, social media platforms are designed to exploit psychological vulnerabilities. Infinite scrolling, notifications, and personalised content feeds are carefully crafted to keep users engaged for extended periods, beyond their original intentions, beyond the limits of their willpower.

Both electronic gambling machines and social media platforms want to keep users engaged—forever if they can. Social media algorithms analyse user behaviour to provide content that is most likely to keep people scrolling, commenting, and interacting. Unsurprisingly, the content that is most likely to keep our monkey brains engaged is emotionally charged and often violent—not nuanced and thought-provoking, but obscene and anger-inducing.

<sup>4</sup> The idea of a society based on infinite distraction was presciently present in the book "Infinite Jest" by David Foster Wallace. A novel set in a future where entertainment rules society. Wallace explores the relationship between addiction, entertainment, and the pursuit of happiness. The book anticipates many of our current concerns, as the author invites us to contemplate the meaning of life and the nature of addiction in a hyper-connected world.

There's more. Social media platforms incorporate reward systems, such as likes, comments, and shares, which trigger dopamine release in the brain, creating a sense of pleasure and reinforcement. This powerful dopamine-driven feedback loop leads to addictive behaviour. We're hooked—not on caffeine or cocaine, but on shiny red notification circles.

So, here we are. If you raise your head and look around, instead of your fellow citizens you'll be submerged in the swampy slop of modern digital advertising. Bow your head and sink into your smartphone, and you're in as much danger as when entering a casino. Perhaps it's worse if we consider that a casino doesn't follow you home and sleep next to you on your bedside table. Also, you don't worry much about the casino. The smartphone, on the other hand, is constantly on your head. Like the ring praying on Bilbo Baggins' mind:

*“And yet it would be a relief in a way not to be bothered with it any more. It has been so growing on my mind lately. Sometimes I have felt it was like an eye looking at me. And I am always wanting to put it on and disappear, don't you know; or wondering if it is safe, and pulling it out to make sure. I tried locking it up, but I found I couldn't rest without it in my pocket. I don't know why. And I don't seem able to make up my mind.”*

Isn't it uncannily familiar? When someone misplaces their smartphone, they instantly turn into Gollum: *Where is it? Where is it? It was in my pocket, is it charged? Is it safe? My precious...* In the Lord of the Rings book, the ring made its wearers invisible. Don't smartphones turn us invisible to each other? During a taxi ride, in the elevator, at the park while our children play, at the bus stop. We don't see the people around us, they don't see us, we're not sharing a space. We're not living with each other; we coexist.

Speaking of addiction, did you know there's a correlation between the decline in smoking and a rise in smartphone usage? Let's take a moment to observe that smoking and touching our smartphones are things we do when we're just existing. Those moments are, of course, horrifying. Unlike a rabbit who's just at ease with *being* a rabbit, people tend to ponder their existence<sup>5</sup>. Pondering one's existence is scary and disturbing, so we need something to distract our minds. Here's another correlation: cigarettes and smartphones will also kill you—one by poisoning your lungs, the other, your soul.

I get the irony. You're probably reading this on your smartphone, aren't you? Stop. Print it out when you can and read it quietly on your couch, on the bus, or at a cafe. If you don't think this essay is worth all that trouble, that's fine. You're probably right, so don't read it. Read something else. Read something ancient and weird that *really* helps you escape the endless cycle of hot political takes, 24-hour news sensationalism, and whatever salacious scandal or horrific tragedy occurred today<sup>6</sup>.

5 There is an immortal line of dialogue in one of P.G. Wodehouse's masterpieces where Bertie Wooster asks his butler Jeeves:

“Bertie: ‘Jeeves, have you ever pondered on Life?’

Jeeves: ‘From time to time, sir, in my leisure moments.’”

6 Of course, a responsible citizen should keep up with current affairs. So, read a current affairs magazine once a month or a weekly newspaper, if you must.

Digital gadgets designed to create addiction were once, in a spectacular display of technological naivety, praised as a force for political liberation—the 2010 so called “Arab Spring” comes to mind. Digital media are now regarded as a fundamental threat to democracy and individual freedom. Based on their misanthropic business model, digital media frequently attacks humanity with authoritarian privacy violations and echo chambers that radicalise the youth (on both rotten ends of the political spectrum). Our frail democracies will not hold against such forces.

Digital totalitarianism is destroying our lives with each other, our real shared existence: sometimes awkward, sometimes unpleasant, occasionally beautiful, but always human. Digital media is corrupting every aspect of human experience: political debate in the town square was replaced by the gladiator arena of social media; romanticism was replaced with dating apps; eroticism with pornography; family movie night with solitary streaming.

Now what?

In her essay “Attention and Will,” Simone Weil described *attention* as the highest form of prayer and a fundamental aspect of human existence. She argued that true attention requires self-emptying and receptivity, allowing for a genuine encounter with the world and with others.

Like David Foster Wallace said: “the real value of a real education, has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: ‘This is water. This is water.’”

We must resist the colonisation by digital technology of our shared collective spaces and our individual minds. To do that, let’s acknowledge that our attention is *precious*. The economic forces behind digital media want you to turn your focus constantly inward. But attention is a form of generosity; it should be pointed outwards. Towards others, towards life itself.

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# Designing freedom

..... **Vasco Branco**

**“I like the noise of democracy.”**

James Buchanan,

15th President of the United States of America from 1857 to 1861.

I was born on the fortunate side of a silenced country. Unlike many, in my parents' house, there was food, clothing, and even the possibility of educating the children. A country where the promise of the future was whispered, sketched in the interstitial spaces of resistance.

And even though some art and artifacts had 'affordances' of freedom — at that time, entering the Gulbenkian felt like leaving the country without needing a passport — any design or discourse for change often came at the painful cost of imprisonment and exile. Fifty years ago, on April 25, poetry took over the streets, as depicted in the posters designed by the artist Vieira da Silva. An experimental poetics, with mistakes, but without tedium. An opportunity to fulfill postponed aspirations for freedom and equality, to experiment democratic citizenship as a means for improving quality of life.

When I speak of democracy, I refer first and foremost to freedom, and immediately after, to the genuine openness toward others that was intensely reflected in the gazes and smiles of the people who flooded the streets of Portugal, particularly on May 1, 1974. Only then do I refer to the institutional dimensions of democracy, which expanded from voting to the improvement of the well-being of the Portuguese people, from the rule of law to advances in the economy and the purchasing power, from the broadening of access to higher education to a remarkable increase in cultural offerings and production.

In the paper “The Design of Portuguese Political Poster: Two Politics, Two Discourses”, Helena Barbosa et al. (2011) analyzes political posters produced during two key moments in 20th-century Portuguese history: the early days of the Estado Novo (1933) and the period of the April 25, 1974 revolution. Common to both is the need to communicate and connect with the people. From there, the opposition between discourses is reflected in the graphic arguments, inferring the popular empathy and participation in April 25, from the healthy uncontrolled profusion of visual languages.

It seems evident that any social movement acquires a visual dimension that plays a key role in its public manifestation — artists and designers produce visual materials for protest<sup>1</sup> or celebration, either on their own initiative or by commission. In the first case, the design

1 The book “Visual Impact: Creative Dissent in the 21st Century” (McQuiston, 2015) illustrates this fact.

reflects the author's worldview; in the second, the result conveys the client's perspective, with the author potentially oscillating between shared convictions, their total absence, or a 'Sophie's Choice'<sup>2</sup>.

But can/should Design, on an ontological level, subscribe to any particular political orientation or cause?

From my perspective, Design is an activity of cultural mediation that manifests in the creation of artifacts, devices, and services. Artefacts, devices and services that culturally intercede (synonymous with mediate) on behalf of people to qualify their lives (Mari, 2003).

Considering Design as cultural mediation is relevant on different levels:

- because it situates the intervention of Design in the construction of the interface—positioned between people and functionality, between needs and desires;
- because it defines this intervention as symbolic construction and, therefore, as an operator on reality(ies), shaping the experience of the world;
- because it qualifies Design as an aesthetic operator, capable of epistemologically engaging the totality of being (Dewey, 1934/2005: 56-57).

The production of meaning or the mediation that objects provide in the relationship between people or between people and the world occurs within a network of negotiated meanings (Boradkar, 2010, p. 8) and demonstrates the agency of objects in those relationships (Latour, 2007).

Today, 50 years after April 25, scientific and technological advancements have led to the proliferation and “popularization” of digital artifacts. We now carry in our pockets computational power incomparably greater than the computer system, housed in a NASA room, that took humanity to the moon in 1969. Whether people are digital natives or digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001), mobile networks, social networks, the acceleration of time, and the increased symbolic value of communication and experience have transformed the way we exist and engage with the world, resulting in an anthropological shift.

As Clive Dilnot (2014, p. 186) observes, our experience of the world is no longer simply “more of the same” with new technologies but rather a qualitatively new historical

<sup>2</sup> making a “Sophie's Choice” means being forced to choose between two equally unbearable alternatives – a reference to the eponymous novel by William Styron (1979). [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Escolha\\_de\\_Sofia](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Escolha_de_Sofia), accessed on 03/12/2024.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.computerweekly.com/feature/Apollo-11-The-computers-that-put-man-on-the-moon>, accessed on 30/11/2024.

condition. This historical condition, characterized by the outreach, ubiquity, and universal scale of the artificial in its invasive and penetrating trajectory, has inaugurated an unescapable era where the artificial has become the determining condition of the world.

“When we can no longer depend upon the possibility of a return to a homeostatic nature, to a rebalanced Mother Earth; when we can no longer rely on purity at all—what are our options?” (Ratto, 2016, p. 28).

Dilnot also discusses the propositional nature of the artificial, where mediation and negotiation shape responses to incommensurability, the absence of law and limits, there are only possibilities. We can infer that in this new human condition, the law — the scientific tradition — is not, nor will it be, decisive in proposing configurations, but rather in the physical aspects of their instantiation. Design, and the theories it fosters, has a provisional, contingent, and aspirational nature (Gaver, 2012), yet its practice is generative of configurations. In its dual condition of possibility and danger, the future of the artificial will depend on the attitudes and values mediated by these configurations.

Today, 50 years after April 25, the streets are beginning to show signs of frustrated expectations, and perhaps as a result, the practice of otherness is losing its strength. On the brink of climate catastrophe, signs that challenge freedom and democratic culture are emerging here, as in other regions, often anchored in the rewriting of reality or even history.

The Portuguese newspaper *Público* recently reported that “German Far-Right Attacks Bauhaus Again, More Than 100 Years Later” (Canelas, L. 11/04/2024). The article details the recent presentation of the motion “Aberration of Modernity: In Favor of a Critical Analysis of the Bauhaus” in the State Parliament of Saxony-Anhalt, aiming to end the “unilateral glorification of the Bauhaus legacy.” The motion accused the Bauhaus of “historical sins against architecture,” “long-term negative social effects,” and of “propagating its leftist ideology and promoting architecture incapable of respecting local identity and artisanal practices”. Although the motion was overwhelmingly rejected by the parliament, it underscores that memory and culture are, and will continue to be, critical arenas of political contention.

Walter Gropius (1968), reflecting on the relationship between art, architecture, and the way of living shaped by democracies, states: “In a long life I have become increasingly aware of the fact that the creation and love of beauty not only enrich man with a great measure of happiness but also bring forth ethical powers.”

If we cross this perspective with the speech by António Damásio (2006) at the opening session of the World Conference on Arts Education, promoted by UNESCO and held in Lisbon in 2006, we confirm that the artistic dimension—and therefore the authorial dimension—is indispensable in any ontology of Design. This is because its intervention can

(or should) embed the reflection and emotion that lead to the appreciation of essential social values.

"[...] arts and humanities education can convey the moral structure that is required for a healthy society and is so challenged by current social developments. And third: arts and humanities education actually fosters the imagination that is necessary for innovation." (Damásio & Damásio, 2006, p.14 e 15).

Poetic activism in Design should, therefore, mediate our new condition as hybrids, caring for the humanity it contains to the fullest, through the "design of desire" (Providência, 2012, p. 137), merging ethics and aesthetics in the experience of things as causes<sup>4</sup>.

To continue celebrating freedom and democracy, it is necessary to understand that "Democracy has the new task to create new myths, new metaphors, new images to show forth the state of new dignity which man has entered upon." (Wilder, 1957) and that, in this sense, the intervention of Design is indispensable, not least because its culture owes to metaphor the operative means by which it imagines and calls forth what does not yet exist (Branco & Providência, 2017).

4 The etymology of the English word "thing" reveals a journey from meaning an assembly, which was decided on beforehand to take place at a certain time and at a certain place to deal with certain "matters of concern" to the community, to meaning an object, "an entity of matter." So, the term thing goes back originally to the governing assemblies in ancient Nordic and Germanic societies. These pre-Christian things were assemblies, rituals, and places where disputes were solved and political decisions made." (Binder & et al., 2011, p. 1). in Portuguese, there is an etymological connection between "coisa" (thing) and "causa" (cause), a term I used as a substitute for 'matter of concern'.

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# 1974/2024 and beyond. Reflections and anticipations.

..... **Jamie Brassett**

In 1974 I was eight years' old. I remember my eighth birthday quite well in comparison with other of my childhood birthdays: hanging out with my best friend that summer, climbing trees and throwing things. I was not aware of the momentous events happening in Portugal. There was no anticipation that, 50 years later, I would have family living in Portugal; with my cousin's now-adult sons having spent almost all their lives in the country and who tease me for my (admittedly laughable) Brazilian-Portuguese pronunciation when singing the songs I learnt as a *capoeirista* in my early 30s. Portugal has infused me in different ways, with different concentrations over these last 50 years and, right now, is emphasising the issues of democracy and dictatorship. Issues which are as vital now as they have ever been: with democratic processes encompassing in one year more of the world's population than at any other time (European Partnership for Democracy, 2024; Jégo et al, 2024) and with non-democratic forces providing a more thorough-going challenge (Charlton, 2024). With this topic of democracy, then, right now, we find expressions of past and future as well as present. It is little wonder that there needs to be a creative, design intervention into this multi-temporal moment.

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Designing is a process with a necessarily intensive future component. At its simplest, there will be something new at a future date from the moment a project is begun, and to get there a process needs to be developed, worked through and managed. There are different ways of understanding and working with the future in this process. For some, designing has the power to create a future state, often a preferred one – transition design works from this perspective (see Brassett (2022) for some discussion of both of these). For others, designing entails imagining a future state and using this imagined model to recreate the present – anticipatory design operates this way. While apparently different, there may be ways in which these two can work together, but it is no problem if they don't, as each is valuable. My own preference is an anticipatory one (Brassett, 2022; Brassett and O'Reilly, 2021a) and I will use this here to develop an approach not to try to prove it is better than any other, to win in some supposed contest, but as an option in an array of possibilities.

This openness to other approaches is as symbolic as it is methodological. I have friends who operate differently to my own preferences – both in terms of design practice and philosophical persuasion – and it has been an important aspect of my philosophical practice in recent years to emphasise friendship, love and mutuality over conflict, argument and the need to defeat (Brassett, 2021).

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18 years before the advent of a democratic Portugal – equivalent to a whole childhood – French philosopher and aesthete Étienne Souriau gave an address to the French Philosophical Society on the topic of the work to be made/done, 'Du mode d'existence de l'œuvre à faire'. In 2009 this essay is appended to the publication of his book *Les Différents modes d'existence* originally published in 1943. I wrote about this in an article published by the journal *Futures* (Brassett, 2022) with a focus on anticipation and in reference to a conference I had participated in two years previously, held in the art and design university in Oslo, Norway. The occasion of the journal publication was a special issue focused on this conference and it contains quite a few essays relating to design in particular, or creative practices more generally. In my article I quote Souriau (2009b, p. 203) from his 1958 address as follows:

'The statue will not come about on its own accord; neither will future humanity. The soul of a new society does not happen by itself, we must work at it; and those who do, should proceed well with its genesis [et ceux qui y travaillent opèrent bien sa genèse]'

An anticipatory stance (Brassett and O'Reilly, 2021c) finds many temporal currents and the creations that they manifest going on here. If 1974 marks a moment of democratic creation, the anticipation of it as a desired state must have been underway for some years prior to this. Practitioners of futures and foresight talk of finding weak signals developing into the present having been expressed from the future (for good overviews of the concept of 'weak signals' see: Kuusi and Hiltunen, 2011; van Veen and Ortt, 2021). Those activist-creators of a democratic Portugal, in these terms, would have been picking up these signals and, in an anticipatory fashion, using them as models for the reconstitution of a Portugal free of dictatorship. Today, the participants of the 1974 revolution for democracy may speak of their having a vision of a new social and political formation and acting on it. I call this anticipation. Souriau might add to this a more insistent ethical and political imperative: these futures we anticipate, the visions of a new state, people, world even, their *souls*, need work and won't come into existence on their own. A future, like a work of art, needs the concerted efforts of many – people, processes, materials, technologies, systems and so on – to exist and the generous participation of each of these elements requires work too. John O'Reilly, in his chapter for our book on philosophy and anticipation quotes Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2006, p. 176) in a similar vein:

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‘[T]aking part in democratic society requires one to be informed. One can hardly be informed unless one has some ability to conduct research, however humble the question or however quotidian its inspiration.’ (Quoted O’Reilly, 2021, p. 124)

For O’Reilly the research in this quotation is driven in terms of anticipation. To be informed (through research) is to enact a change in the present bases upon a model of the future: I need to vote; a future government or way of life will in some way *be* in relation to this vote; therefore, because all of this matters, I need to be informed and be open to the possibility that this informing will lead me to be different to what I am right now. What I become – what the society, country, world in which I and others live might become is work, we remember from Souriau – and to be informed, O’Reilly and Appadurai emphasise, is work. Democracy remains our work to be done, to be created and designed.

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# Shaping Preferred Futures

..... **Bruce Brown**

In themselves, Democracy and Design are tricky concepts—let alone any thoughts of their intersection. For the purposes of this short essay, I will test the idea that democracy is the right of all good citizens to chart the course of their own governance. And, for design, a seemingly parallel formulation that everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.

If there is a relationship between democracy and design then it will track a perennial struggle for governance. Who rules—citizens or the state? What dominates—the truth or will-power? In totalitarian regimes these are wasted questions. Here, trade-offs for the strong arm of state-rule will be domestic security, a comfortable standard of living and sense of national identity. In this scenario design, as the means for citizens to transform their existing situation into a preferred one is not an option—albeit a dangerous one. In this context design will stay in the background as an obedient servant of utility.

In liberal democracies, however, the intersections between democracy and design are historically tangled with design in the foreground.

In the 1890's an Austrian Jew named Edward Bernays left Vienna to settle in New York. He was the nephew of Sigmund Freud and like his uncle 'Ziggy' believed the horrors of World War One had demonstrated that people, en-masse, could not be trusted to chart the course of their own governance—if let off the leash they believed there was an evil side to human nature that could be destructive. Bernays' concluded that the management of society's affairs had to be put in the hands of an intelligent elite employing propaganda as the only alternative to chaos. In his infamous little book, simply titled *Propaganda*, published in 1928, he wrote: "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society...Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society...we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons...who pull the wires which control the public mind...and contrive new ways to bind and guide the world" (Bernays, 2005, p.37-38).

As he explored the power of propaganda to influence mass behaviour Bernays could not have known that Joseph Goebbels was absorbing the ideas he professed. In fascist hands these strategies went on to unleash industrial-scale horrors. The Holocaust was a designed programme—specifically designed to extinguish one section of humankind to purify another. In this context, the formulation that, everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones, is an instrument that can serve good or evil—design is never, in itself, intrinsically good. When, after World War

II, Bernays was asked how he felt about his work being used to destroy his own Jewish roots he was shocked but repeated his conviction that propaganda (and design) were not, in themselves, either good or bad, but could be used for social purposes or misused for antisocial ones.

After the war, Bernays took his convictions and ideas to the highest levels of US politics and business—including J.D. Rockefeller, Calvin Coolidge, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt and corporations like Procter and Gamble, American Tobacco, CBS, General Electric and Dodge Motors. To reconcile the post-war conundrum, between individual freedom and state control in a liberal democracy, Bernays helped to redefine liberty as ‘freedom of choice’. He employed the idea that freedom to choose, from an increasingly exotic range of domestic consumer goods, would satiate the masses and keep their minds off state politics. So began the age of conspicuous consumption and the consuming individual. This also gave rise to a new profession in which design was foregrounded as the styling and streamlining of everything from toasters to trains. Along with other survivors of the war many in this new breed of designers were Jewish emigres who went on to make important contributions to design in the twentieth century.

So, after two world wars had threatened the existence of liberal democracy in Europe, from the mid twentieth century on design, as an industry, began to flourish. Like a Phoenix, emerging from the ashes of a shattered Europe, rose the modernist designer. Their chief Cardinal, Walter Gropius, described this new breed of designers as living “in an era of dissolution without guidance”. Standing alone the “old forms are in ruins, the benumbed world is shaken up, the old human spirit is invalidated and in flux towards a new form.” But, by 1981, Tom Wolfe in his book *From Bauhaus to Our House*, was more circumspect of the heroic modernist designer emerging from rubble and smoking ruins —‘starting from zero! If you were young, it was wonderful stuff. Starting from zero referred to nothing less than re-creating the world.’

A decade before Wolfe published his provocative essay other voices sought to transform design into a science. In 1971 B.F. Skinner published a profound and profoundly controversial book titled *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. In this he argued that exponential progress in science and technology had not simply fuelled the design of massive social and environmental progress, which it had, but also brought significant social and environmental problems. His conclusion was not that science, technology or design could reverse the tide but that managing human behaviour was the answer. He wrote: “In short, we need to make vast changes in human behavior, and we cannot make them with the help of nothing more than physics or biology...What we need is a technology of behavior”. Skinner’s book was controversial because it denied the idea of the autonomous human being having the liberty to exercise free will. Instead, he concluded that human responses were circumscribed by external stimuli and genetic history. Instead of prioritising freedom and dignity as key personal attributes Skinner argued that we should focus on designing the physical and

social environments people inhabit and respond to.

Though never drawing a direct connection between his own work and that of Skinner, Herbert Simon drew similar conclusions. In his book *The Sciences of the Artificial*, first published in 1969, Simon worked to establish design as a science that embraced all aspects of the human condition. So it was he who coined the neat definition “everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones”. The influence of this formulation on the practices of twenty-first century design has been profound and still comes closest to a universally accepted definition of design. The effect of Simon’s work was to steer design into more intangible systems that governed the human condition. So there emerged a new generation of designers for whom design was everywhere with few defining edges. Currently, the practice of design seems boundless—we hear about the design of business, of corporate responsibility, the design of cities and nations, of cultural identities, the design of publics or the design of democracy.

Few designers who subscribe to Simon’s formulation of design are aware of the principles that underpin it. Whereas Skinner believed free will to be an illusion, Simon thought peoples’ ability to make reasoned choices was severely limited. He called it ‘bounded rationality’. Simon thought human beings, as behaving systems, were quite simple and that, Like Skinner, the complexity of our behaviour was a direct result of the complexity of the environments in which we found ourselves. He wrote that “people—or at least their intellectual component—may be relatively simple, that most of the complexity of their behavior may be drawn from the environment, from their search for good designs. If I have made my case, then we can conclude that, in large part, the proper study of mankind is the science of design...” (Simon, 1996, p.138).

If, in liberal democracies from the mid twentieth century on, design emerged and was promoted as a force for good in the world, with designers as its moral crusaders serving the best interests of mankind, what went wrong? In the 1990’s, when the fall of the Berlin Wall symbolically opened barriers to peace and freedom, and Silicon Valley promised a worldwide web of citizen democracy, what happened? Why is democracy now in retreat and totalitarian regimes—led by individuals who feel empowered to commit crimes without punishment—on the rise? Why is big tech now seen as a threat to democracy?

The reasons are complex. One may lie in a failure of design, or designers, to accept human behaviour as it is—in particular, the acceptance of conflict as an intrinsic facet of the human psyche. For example, if the typically utopian visions of designers were to cause all bad things to wither away, and only the good things to remain, then it would not be long before one good thing was brought into conflict with another good thing. There will never come a point where the world is either Capitalist or Communist, Right or Left, that societies are either all good or all bad or that the true conditions for democracy will either be citizen rule or state rule.

Other reasons may lie in the legacy of behaviourist principles still popularised in books such as *Nudge* or *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Herbert Simon's insight, that a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention that limits human judgment (bounded rationality as he defined it) has, with the rise of social media, come true. How citizens can now make good judgments concerning their own governance, or know which sources of information to trust, is challenging. Social media also gives the voices of ignorance a platform to change conversations. However, it does not follow that human beings, as behaving systems, are quite simple and, conversely, the environments they inhabit are complex. Nor that, for this reason, design should simply focus on the social and physical environments that people inhabit.

A failure to acknowledge that human behaviour is as complex as the environments it has created will stimulate unpredictable and inexplicable outcomes that seem bizarre, irrational or, in the recent words of some political leaders, just "weird". Furthermore, it has driven truth into hiding. Now, there are few truths to inform the democratic agenda—truth is defined by identifying the enemy—and, if there is no enemy, then, in the interests of truth, one has to be created. Here society is driven towards polarisation.

Though the role of design in a free society has become increasingly complex it is clear that the determinist principles on which twentieth century design was founded are no longer valid. If there is a way for design to help sustain a free society, and reduce polarisation, then it may need to accept conditions in the round. Human behaviour is as complex as the social and physical environments it creates—just as design can be used for social good and misused for anti-social purposes. Design needs to become the fulcrum in a messy and untidy world if it is to support a free society.

# Agonistic co-design - managing consensus or embracing conflict?

..... Paul Chamberlain

## Introduction

This short article advocates for collaborative and democratic approaches to design research but highlights a concern that the full value of Design is rarely fully exploited and often diluted in the process of participatory and interdisciplinary research, Academic institutions and research funding bodies continue to encourage collaborative and interdisciplinary research through changes to operational structures, processes, and systems. This has the potential for nurturing more inclusive and democratic research but there still remains disciplinary hierarchies in collaborative research. This narrative reflects on the importance of democratic approaches to research through genuine creative engagement and discourse, rather than seeking solutions through consensus.

## Collaborative Design

Co-design is increasingly adopted to foster participatory and democratic approaches to design research. However, these methodologies have evolved over time and are rooted in Scandinavian democratic practices from the 1970's (Kensing & Greenbaum 2013). The first international conference of the Design Research Society in 1971 was entitled 'Design Participation' where Nigel Cross suggested, 'Involving in the design process those who will be affected by its outcome, may provide a means for eliminating many potential problems at their source,' (Cross 1972). This is still common to much design research and practice where the engagement of others can help designers better understand context of use and identify and focus on important challenges and problems faced by end users. The participatory approach is often described as co-design where the role of users and stakeholder engagement varies throughout the design process from ideation through to realisation.

There is an increasing number of toolkits and models to support more inclusive approaches to design through co-design activity that have emerged, including the UK's Design Council double diamond model (<https://www.designcouncil.org.uk>) which has been extensively used to describe and support non-designers in the activity of design. While there is merit in promoting the virtues and benefits of design, and there are good examples of where these

tools have supported research teams through the complexity of co-design (Chamberlain et al 2021), there is growing concern that less considered approaches are dumbing down the rigor demanded and inherent in good design.

Experienced design practitioners and researchers generally understand that while some of these toolkits and the Design Council's model present a useful aid for non-designers, they are crude simplification of what is a messy, complicated process and often compromises realities. There are a growing number of opponents to the use of these sometimes narrow approaches to co-design that lack involvement of marginalised communities, have co-design approaches set out before a project commences and often managed by disciplines who lack design understanding and exclude design expertise.

When design is managed outside the field of design, it often takes the form of 'design thinking' (Bender-Salazar, 2023), which has been popularised as a way for organisations to engage in innovative problem solving. However, many strands of design and research challenge the notion of design just as a matter of solving problems and use design to translate critical thought into tangible forms. Artefacts developed and presented through this process are not solutions, but vehicles through which to engage people, promote discussion, to raise questions, challenge preconceptions and generate in-depth data.

### **Democratic design**

Adopting co-design as a broader democratic value system is now becoming fundamental to much design research. As well as informing the design of products these approaches play an increasingly important role in shifting cultures and the way that particular practices are performed. The process of engaging in more inclusive design activities can help individuals and communities rethink and reframe existing protocols. These methods are centred on the principle that participant engagement can provide value throughout research planning and implementation, yielding findings that directly reflect on a community's needs and perceptions.

It is easy for academics to construct research projects in accordance with their own ideas and experiences rather than those of participants. Consequently, it is important participants are given an active role, allowing them to shape the direction and methods of the research itself. This necessitates a need to equip individuals with the skills to productively engage and manage their idealistic and realistic perspectives on co-design.

While there may be a deliberate effort to balance power distribution among participants and stakeholders it does not mean treating all interests equally which is often impossible. If co-design is a methodology that presents a democratic approach to research, it has to offer more than simply achieving a design solution through consensus and structured deliberation. According to Slingerland and Wang (2024), change inherently reshapes power

dynamics, often favoring certain individuals or interests at the expense of others. They claim co-design facilitators should thus be aware that treating all interests equally is impossible and instead address whose interests are prioritised and whose interests are oppressed in the co-design process.

## **Re-understanding Design**

It is critical that design researchers better communicate design research methods and their value to non- designers to ensure rigor is applied more broadly to design activities in co-design practices and preferably ensure that design expertise is involved. Frequently research budgets undervalue and under cost design activity to the extent that co-design becomes compromised and de-risked.

Additionally, it is important that designers continually reflect upon and critique their own practices.

‘Most people aren’t trained to want to face the process of re-understanding a subject they already know. One must obtain not just literacy, but deep involvement and re-understanding.’ (Charles Eames)

Richard Neutra (1890-1970) was one of the 20th century’s most prominent architects who wrote the seminal book *Survival through Design* (Neutra 1954) and was fascinated by architecture’s power to improve the health of its inhabitants. The text is impressively more relevant than ever 70 years on. Richard Neutra established the Neutra Institute, a non- profit organisation, in 1962. Now Richard’s youngest son Raymond is president of the institute, its mission to preserve and use the Neutra legacy to promote creative research and design for the benefit of the planet. Richard Neutra claimed to adopt a user-centred participatory approach, committed to understanding the needs of his clients. However, Raymond Neutra challenges his father’s viewpoint and provides a useful perspective on participatory design approaches.

‘We need to be sensitive to the differences in ideology and that there isn’t a right solution. It depends on the dynamics of the particular community that you are in. A good solution is one that you create an environment within a social setting that can come to agree on the facts, or they are clear about what they can’t agree on. And then say. Ok then given that, what are our options? What can we do? ...and people muddle through with a solution that is good enough..... So I don’t think my father in *Survival through Design* quite understood that, he really thought that if you had the facts right there would be one solution that would be the right solution.’

Raymond Neutra 2023. (Interviewed by Paul Chamberlain during his research residency at the Neutra Institute)

### **Agonistic Design**

While Co-Design has huge value and should be an integral part of much research, I have an increasing concern that methods are becoming too predictable and tokenistic. Co-design should stretch beyond the 'workshop' and the use of sticky notes that have tended to become ubiquitous in academic research. Design principles and guidelines can be useful and effective but design activity within co-design is increasingly becoming formulaic. There is need to embed more creativity and design rigor within co-design and shift towards more diverse forms and methods of participatory engagement.

Co-design is often the default for democratic design, but DiSalvo (2010) suggests the notion of what constitutes democracy is relatively unexamined. He describes how democracy can be cast as an endeavor of fervent competition and struggle among competing ideals, values and beliefs. Agonistic design recognises the importance of acknowledging and embracing conflict and should be carefully considered in co-design activities. Rather than trying to eliminate these tensions, agonistic design sees them as productive forces that can lead to more innovative, inclusive, [democratic] and contextually relevant design outcomes (Björgvinsson et al., 2012). Careful consideration should also be given to agonist space where agonistic design can flourish to creatively manage differences and conflict and support open and honest participation in co-design. Reflecting on Charles Eames' quote, it is important we establish a re-understanding of what Design means in co-design.

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# Design and democracy: Fact or fiction?

..... **Henri Christiaans**

I have always felt comfortable to live in a country where democracy is said to be the best form of government. Arguments I use to defend my confidence are based on the traditional values of democracy: the practice of representation, the pursuit of equality, people's participation, separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers, free and honest elections, and free media guaranteeing the self-cleaning capacity of democracy. But reality today tells another story about these values, making it hard to believe that democracy is in itself strong enough to keep up with these values. It is becoming a global problem because democracy has many faces depending on where and when you observe the situation. The political system itself of representative democracy is experienced as insufficient and faith in politicians is eroding. Increasingly, people seem to be placing their hopes in authoritarian leaders who care little about democratic rules such as respect for minorities, a free press or an independent judiciary. Others start protesting against the ruling power, be it on a (inter)national or local level. Think for example of the 'gilets jaunes' (yellow vests) in France, Pegida in Germany, Extinction Rebellion founded in London, and the farmers' protests in the Netherlands (Suransky, Suárez Müller, and Manschot, 2021). These are not movements defined in a traditional way in terms of left/right or conservative/progressive dimensions.

However, we cannot deny that democracy has always struggled with tension between popular government and concentrated authority. In different times and places the ideas and meanings are framed differently. Democracy is defined by the ongoing struggle over the meaning of democracy as Rosanvallon (2019) describes it: It is an order that is in permanent flux and therefore not a finished ideal to be achieved. Our welfare state has no answer to this new situation and so, people are pinning all their hopes on populism, a sort of (elite-led) revolt by the people against the establishment that upset the status quo and channel the frustrations of a fed-up, hitherto 'silent' majority (Saward, 2021). Populism is a very structured answer to contemporary issues such as inequality, distrust. It contains an alternative vision of democracy, equality, justice, the economy. It offers a complete vision of society (Rosanvallon, 2019). Opponents clearly counter with worries about populist challenges to press freedom, the rule of law, and the place of truth and fact in public life. But they often forget that

What has design to do with the current issues and problems in our democratic society? Can we find any design feat that shows a successful translation of democracy into a solution for any current problem in our society? A building or product or system that is etched in our collective memory? We have to go back to the first half of the 20th century

for examples of artists and designers united in their pursuit of an utopian society. Look at Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin, an urbanistic utopia consisting of housing for three million people in the central part of Paris. At most, it was a formula for social reform.

Or take De Stijl (The style) in the Netherlands with among others, Theo van Doesburg, Gerrit Rietveld en Pieter Mondrian. De Stijl believed in its utopian aspirations that would be best achieved by creating total environments, over which the designer had complete control. It had a profound influence on the development of art, architecture and design, also on Walter Gropius' Bauhaus, which attempted to unify individual artistic vision with the principles of mass production with an emphasis on function.

Probably those movements were inspiration for Enzo Manzini and Victor Margolin in 2017 to write a letter to the global design community titled 'Stand up for Democracy'. In their letter they called for actions of designers against the attacks on democracy by taking a stand and speak out. The community should "... recognize the strong convergence between democracy and design in four respects: design of democracy - improving democratic processes and the institutions on which democracy is built; design for democracy - enabling more people to participate in the democratic process, especially through the use of technology; design in democracy - building access, openness and transparency into institutions in ways that assure equality and justice; design as democracy - the practise of participatory design so that diverse actors can shape our present and future worlds in fair and inclusive ways."

However noble such a call is, we should be really critical about the current impact of design and designers on democratic processes. Agbo (2018 calls it irony that the letter put designers forward as plausible pro-democracy advocates, in the light of "...recurring anti-democratic narratives currently plaguing the design community."(p. 130) And he adds that most people view designers as an integral core of the social class responsible for the current unpleasant socio-economic narratives. Or, in the words of Erlhoff and Rezai (2021, p. 10): "Design has become an agent at the heart of capitalism and an essential instrument of industrialization. It thus also co-creates the market strategies that the ruling powers aim to occupy within democracy. Hence, design is understandably regarded as being opportunist and conformist."

Opponents of these negative views will argue that in many ways design has also contributed to people's welfare. They come up with many examples, from inclusive user-centered design to contributions in the area of sustainability. Furthermore, one of the main assets of designers, 'design thinking,' has found a broad application among governments and local municipalities as a method that can help them to shape the administrative transformation from 'government' to 'governance' that is, from hierarchical and centralized institutions and top-down enactment of power and policy to more 'networked' arrangements and 'interactive' mechanisms. But again, manipulation is lurking as in a

politics of consensus design thinking can be used to frame, select and steer competing or conflicting interests.

In this context it is a poignant fact that in 30 years of research into design thinking the big issues regarding democracy and the role of design hardly were addressed.

If professional designers fail in taking responsibility, can we create a culture in which people feel like guardians and co-designers of democracy? If we look at design for democracy the following issues are at stake.

- We need to outline a policy aimed at increasing the common knowledge of society (Rosanvallon, 2018). That also has everything to do with creating trust. If you don't know anything about someone, you can't trust him. Trust comes when you have information from others. So to increase trust in society, you need to increase social knowledge. That is a very important element of a social contract. There lies a major task for politics, education and the press, but also for design.
- Design approaches should propose new qualities for democracy and challenge assumptions of who (or what) counts as a participant in democratic deliberation? New developments in architecture offer a participatory design approach that encourages members of each community to be part of communal interventions (Agbo, 2021).
- For quite some time philosophy and ethics were not high on the agenda of design education. The rapid changes in society and the impact of new technology ask for an holistic view on our world.
- There is a need for longterm vision on the role of design in which the implications of design applications are also taken into account. This asks for design in which ethical principles are represented.
- If there is any topic that deserves special attention, it is the care for the piece of earth on which we work and live. The relationship between people and the earth has become unbalanced as expressed by the term 'anthropocene'. According to some it began with the industrial revolution and it forces us to reconceptualize the way we live in a radically new way. What we need now is a new vision of people's relationship to their local environment (Suranski et al., 2020). How could we develop and strengthen the relationship between local society and its living environment from a design perspective?

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# What has design got to do with democracy and the state of the world? A personal reflection.

..... Rachel Cooper

In 1974, new democracies were forming Europe, Portugal, Greece and later Spain committed themselves to democratic government. While democracy in the United States was rocked by the resignation of President Richard Nixon due to the Watergate Scandal and challenged in the UK by a bomb in the Houses of Parliament. Africa had been undertaking a process of decolonisation gaining independence from European colonial powers since the second world war. Australasia had stable democratic political systems, although Indigenous rights and land rights issues were becoming increasingly important on the political landscape. By 1974, most African nations were independent states, either moving towards democracy or experiencing shifts in leadership. China was experiencing the tumultuous period known as the Cultural Revolution, with significant political instability. The Middle East was characterized by a mix of regional conflicts, such as The Arab-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian struggles and tensions leading up to the Lebanese civil war. South America was a diverse range of political systems, from military dictatorships to democracies. While the Soviet Union, governed by the Communist Party was engaged the Cold War primarily with the United States. The world today is very different, technologically, socially and environmentally, however democracy and hence conflict is still to some extent in crisis and tensions underline much of civil society.

What has design got to do with democracy and the state of the world. During the fifty years since 1974, design as a discipline has changed unrecognisably. In 1974, I had just completed my undergraduate degree in design, graduating from one of the first courses in multi-disciplinary design in the UK. Design at that time was principally divided into practice disciplines: graphic, product, interior, fashion, etc, in the intervening period design has been liberated and through this liberation moved into many spheres of society, communities and governance and hence responsibility.

What have been the drivers of this change? I will principally use the UK and Europe as my reference points as that is where I have worked most, although I am aware of the ripple effect and collaborations that have encompassed many parts of the world and thus influenced design and the use of design everywhere. My focus to is on the design disciplines and does not include architecture, at least at the beginning.

In my view the drivers of change for design have taken a two-pronged approach. First there have been changes in what the design profession offers to business. Like all other professions the design sector scans the economic and business landscape for opportunities and growth. In the 70's 80's 90's in the UK and Europe the design contribution to business was principally around the relationship to innovation, new product development and manufacturing, aimed at enhancing productivity and competitiveness. Indeed, in the 1980s Britain was increasingly design conscious, with high street spending boosting design investment, consumers and retailers convinced about the merits of good design and industrial designers now part of a growing and increasingly visible design industry. It was at that time in the UK that the Design Council and other trade bodies launched the annual Design in Business Week and Design in Education Week and other design awards to support designers, companies, and industries in leveraging design for innovation. The change of government in 1997 triggered Creative Britain, which focused on how Britain's design strengths could help to improve the country's global standing. Later the same year, Prime Minister Tony Blair launched Millennium Products, which by 2000 would identify 1,012 outstanding examples of British design and innovation and communicate the stories behind them in publications, learning materials and web-based case studies. Similarly design and innovation were being increasingly being promoted in the United States, for example in 1980s the IDSA (Industrial Design Society of America founded in 1965) established the Industrial Design Excellence Awards (IDEA) with the aim of "to recognize exceptional achievement in industrial design". In Europe, in 1991 Peter Zec developed what had until then been a national competition in Germany into RED dot an international platform for the evaluation of design. In the 2000's the policy makers in European Commission picked up the value of design and innovation, later in 2011 establishing the European Leadership board whose remit was "to provide recommendations on how to enhance the role of design in innovation policy in Europe at the national, regional or local level and to develop a joint vision, priorities and actions, and henceforth to integrate design as a part of innovation policies in Europe."<sup>1</sup> At the same time the growth in branding, corporate identity in the 1980's and 1990's alongside the growth service sector, provided another avenue for designers to channel their creative thinking, this stimulated the emergence of the new professional discipline of service design. Thus, by the 2000's there was global professional advocacy for the value of design and its contribution to growth and wealth creation both in product and service design and innovation.

1 Evans, M., & Chisholm, J. (2016). Design for Europe: Employing Scenarios to Benchmark the Effectiveness of European Design Policy. *The Design Journal*, 19(2), 253-268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2016.1130362>

At the same time, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a recognition that the evolving and increasing environmental and societal challenges needed to be addressed through technology and design. Designers were partly responsible for the environmental crisis, and despite our focus on customers and human centred design we needed to think more carefully of the human condition to be more socially and environmentally responsible. This approach was bound up in what I see as the second driver of change in design especially in the UK but also globally, this is the increase in focus on design as a scholarly discipline, the growth in design research within the university system and the development of design doctorates. This resulted in the emergence of more design graduates who engaged in the discipline practice alongside philosophical perspectives and often developed a more targeted social conscience. Obviously, this was not new but was stimulated by authors like Victor Papanek<sup>2</sup>.

To fast forward to 2024 academic development and rigour as a legitimate discipline has enabled collaboration with other disciplines who recognise the value of the design approach. One that embraces systemic thinking, includes the voices of many stakeholders, that aids the understanding of complex problems through visual and prototyping methods. We have seen the development of sector and challenge-based design, such as design for sustainability, design for health, for wellbeing, for service, and latterly for policy<sup>3</sup>. There is now collaboration across the world, through societies, and conferences and global organisations such as the World Design Organisation.

One of the persistent changes that has happened both in industry and the profession is the recognition that the engagement with people, customers, patients, communities, indeed whomever has a stake in the design process is crucial to success. Hence, we have seen a growth in participatory design, co-design and similar approaches. Alongside this is a recognition of the dominance of specific culture and histories and thus the need to decolonise design education. We see the growth in designing for social justice, designing for equality. At the same time technological and environmental challenges means that we must understand and design for the whole system, many people now call this 'more than human design'<sup>4</sup>

2 Papanek, V., (1972) *Design for the Real World: human Ecology and Social change*, Thames & Hudson

3 This is reflected in the books published in my edited book series *Design for Social Responsibility* <https://www.routledge.com/Design-for-Social-Responsibility/book-series/DSR>  
And more recently in the series edited by Paul Rogers *Design Research for Change* <https://www.routledge.com/Design-Research-for-Change/book-series/DRC>

4 Coulton, P., & Lindley, J. G. (2019). More-Than Human Centred Design: Considering Other Things. *The Design Journal*, 22(4), 463–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2019.1614320>

This diverse array of design lenses, the tools and techniques used by designers have over the last ten years has also been recognised by policy makers, in the UK we saw the formation of the Policy Lab. These designers like their counterparts in industry use co-design, ethnography, workshops, route maps, visualisations, prototypes and many other elements of the design tool kit to work with policy makers across government to inform policy decisions. Design for Policy is now a significant discipline and profession. In one sense designers are now nearer to governance and policy than ever before.

So has design moved closer to democracy, what is that relationship. I refer to a quote I have often used by Norman Potter:

'Every human being is a designer. Many also earn their living by design – in every field of that warrants pause, and careful consideration, between conceiving of an action and a fashioning of the means to carry it out, and an estimation of its effects' Norman Potter 1969<sup>5</sup>

Design is a decision-making process, and since 1974 design as a discipline has taken broader, wider, deeper perspectives on the challenges facing us. Designers have taken on a leadership or convening roles, design has been promoted as a tool for good<sup>6</sup>. Yet with such roles comes more responsibility.

In the face of global challenges, such as the adoption of technologies, the climate crisis, the movement of people across the planet, and ongoing war, designing responsibly, designing democratically, this does mean designers engaging many voices (human and beyond) in the design decision-making process, so perhaps we have moved closer to democracy but this relationship will be an ongoing challenge.

5 Potter, N., (1969) What is a Designer: things, Places, Messages, Studio Vista, London

6 <https://designforgood.org/?section=navGoals>

# Design and the primacy of democratic values

..... **Carlos A. M. Duarte**

As we mark the 50th anniversary of Portuguese democracy, as a corollary of the Revolution of 25 April 1974, which marked the beginning of democratic life in Portugal, it is important to remember that the military coup led by the Armed Forces Movement put an end to the authoritarian regime of the Estado Novo, thus paving the way for the resolution of the problem of the colonial war and, in particular, for the democratisation and development of the country.

It is also important to mention, as happened with most of the other Western European countries after the end of the Second World War, that this was a landmark event in the history of humanity in the 20th century, a period marked by the realisation of profound social transformations in the world, starting with the overthrow of the authoritarian extremism of conservative ideologies, consolidating the influence of social democracy and the welfare state in Europe, following the creation and implementation of the Marshall Plan, which aimed to promote the economic recovery of the Western European countries in cooperation.

The European Coal and Steel Community was created in 1951 and the European Parliament in 1952, the embryos of the Treaties of Rome signed in 1957, which established the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community as the pillars of the current European Union, promoting greater economic integration in Europe and the start of international cooperation based on common principles and values, such as freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law, or the promotion of peace and stability, emphasising the primacy of the values of Democracy, but also the undeniable importance that Design achieved at the time in people's lives and in society in general, as a consequence of the post-war reconstruction of Europe, but also of technological and production developments, as well as notable scientific advances.

It is in this creative and social ecosystem that the World Design Organisation (WDO)<sup>®</sup> arose, as a non-governmental organisation recognised throughout the world, which aims to promote design and in particular the discipline of industrial design and its power to improve the economic, social, cultural and environmental quality of life.

Founded in 1957, the WDO currently serves more than 215 member organisations around the world, involving thousands of individual designers through its innovative programming and initiatives that advocate and promote "design for a better world".

Design is definitely being applied to production methods (Bonsiepe, 2011), influenced by the rapid incursion of microelectronics into all our daily activities. A wide variety of new influences are being generalised. Consumers are adopting different lifestyles and sensibilities.

While design trends in North America are oriented towards marketing and styling, Italy is one of the most important nations for the development of design, marked by improvisation and cultural tradition. The Vespa Scooter and the Fiat 500 are its greatest exponents, without forgetting the powerful shapes of the sports cars from Alfa Romeo, Lancia and Ferrari, the Olivetti typewriters by Marcello Nizzoli, as well as the fashion and furniture developed by Achille Castiglioni (Hauffe, 1998).

In Germany, the implementation of theoretical systems was once again sought, the "German Werkbund" resurfaced and the Ulm Academy was founded by Max Bill, Hans Gugelot and Otl Aicher, who was responsible for the corporate image of BMW, Braun and Erco. The characteristic of German design became "Good Form", which implied simplicity, purpose, durability and not losing its aesthetic sense over time (Hauffe, 1998).

Still in Europe, the Scandinavian countries, following the experimentalist line of the Italians, were able to design pieces that are still coveted today. Designers such as the Danes Arne Jacobsen and Verner Panton, and the Finn Alvar Aalto are the authors of pieces that are still produced today in the most varied forms (Hauffe, 1998).

However, in the second half of the 1960s, consumer society, which until then had been in a euphoric mood, was dealt a severe blow. In North America, and as a result of the war in Vietnam, young people are looking for new values - peace and love. There is a new culture that prefers rock music, pop art, films that are not from Hollywood but from other sources, all of which has contributed to a new perspective on the nature of design (Hauffe, 1998).

In Germany, the line of functionalism is questioned, leading to the closure of the Ulm Academy (1968). The continuation of industrial mass production was called into question in the UK, Italy and finally Germany. There was a period of great utopianism and experimentalism (Hauffe, 1998).

Portugal, on the other hand, remained hobbled by the regime in force at the time, in which social and democratic backwardness was all too evident. Thus, in contrast to post-war Western Europe, Portuguese design was particularised by the country's various social, economic and political factors, marked by the authoritarian regime of a conservative, nationalist and corporatist nature of the fascist-inspired state established in 1933 and known as the Estado-Novo.

To this end, from 1948 onwards, the Estado-Novo also resorted to Design to promote public policies, primarily enshrined by the National Information Secretariat, which relied on designers such as Sebastião Rodrigues to promote the nationalist and patriotic values defended by the regime, or Daciano Costa, one of the biggest names in Portuguese design, who was called upon to intervene in public spaces. This materialised in the 1960s with the modularisation of production in the national furniture industry, such as Fábrica Portugal, Longra or Olaio, producing products of aesthetic and functional quality on a large scale.

However, in the 1970s, a wide range of new influences and ideas became widespread. Consumers adopted different lifestyles and sensibilities in relation to design, influenced by the rapid incursion of microelectronics into all activities, which resulted in the restructuring of industry and society itself, with the consequent democratisation of access to consumer goods.

New design spread its influence to Germany with Volker Albus and Siegfried Michael Syniuga, to England with Ron Arad and Jasper Morrison, who sought simplicity, to Spain with Oscar Tusquets Blanca and Javier Mariscal, to France with Philippe Starck and Jean-Paul Gaultier, among others, in Italy - 1976, with Alessandro Mendini and with the split in 1981 of "Studio Alchimia", a second movement was formed - "Memphis" led by Ettore Sottsass, based on the sensual relationship that objects can transmit to those who use them (Duarte, 2007).

In Portugal, the Carnation Revolution took place and the dictatorial regime was definitively overthrown. With the advent of democracy, production, distribution and consumption processes changed. The possibilities of communicating broadened, the way of understanding and participating in the communication process changed and its power and reach were reinvented. The arts and graphic design are associated with the political idea of building a plural and participatory society. We can characterise it as a time of jubilation, of militancy, of reclaiming the street as a space for creation, but also of the collective sense of projects, research and experimentation.

It is in this new widespread advent in Europe that design plays a significant role in promoting democracy, especially in terms of accessibility, inclusion and citizen participation. The development of urban design initiatives that seek to create accessible and welcoming public spaces for all citizens is promoted, as well as service design projects that aim to guarantee equity and accessibility in areas such as health, transport and education. In addition, participatory design is increasingly valued, allowing local communities to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives and their environments. All of these design approaches help to strengthen democratic values and promote a more inclusive and equal society in Europe.

1989 saw the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet bloc. 1992 saw the signing of the Treaty on European Union. The Euro became a currency in its own right in 1999.

Design became a natural part of corporate identity, and products began to take on an image of their own that led consumers to identify with it. It has become an important feature of culture and everyday life, from three-dimensional objects to graphic communications and integrated information systems, technology and urban environments.

We can therefore say that nowadays we have a diversity of solutions that are immeasurably more complex, which make them easier to use in our daily activities, but also that designers now have an intrinsic social responsibility, being able to bring about real change in the world through good and responsible design. They can contribute to the development of more sustainable products, carefully selecting the materials to be used and extending the life cycle of products, promoting the digitalisation of the economy, which allows for more efficient processes, a reduction in energy consumption, minimisation of waste, with highly customised products adapted to the client.

We can therefore say that after the Second World War, design played an important role in promoting democracy, ensuring that products, services and spaces are accessible and inclusive for all their users, regardless of their origin, abilities or needs, facilitating access, for example in the design of accessible voting systems, or inclusive public spaces or even intuitive digital interfaces for better engagement of individuals with democratic processes, as participatory design processes, as a process that causes the rearrangement, alteration and renewal of interactions in a system, which can allow different groups to have a voice in the development of solutions that affect their lives, thus strengthening Democracy.

I'll end by quoting Victor Margolin and Ezio Manzini (2017), who tell us that the power and voice of Design must be intrinsically and continuously related to the development of democratic forms and processes, which are constructive possibilities for the future. This is the contribution of Design that we want, as the primacy of the values of Democracy.

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# The Second Law of Thermodynamics: A Blueprint for Design and Democracy

..... **Fernando Carvalho Rodrigues**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The author utilized artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT for text revision and language enhancement during the writing process.

Design, at its core, is a process of creation that thrives on diversity. It is both a mirror and a catalyst for change in the world, rooted in the laws of nature that govern the universe itself. The most fundamental of these laws, which has profound implications for how we live, work, and interact, is the Second Law of Thermodynamics. This law, which dictates that entropy always increases in a closed system, is not just a principle of physics—it is the very heartbeat of design and democracy.

## **The Second Law of Thermodynamics and its Implications**

The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that in any closed system, the total entropy (or disorder) will always increase over time. It is expressed through an inequality: the variation of entropy is greater than zero. Unlike an equation, which has a finite number of solutions, an inequality suggests that there are limitless possibilities. This reflects the infinite solutions the universe offers, from the most fundamental physical laws to the diverse forms of life, societies, and ideas that emerge within it.

Design, in many ways, can be understood as a direct response to this principle. The universe itself is designed to generate and sustain diversity. The very fabric of existence, from the stars to the smallest particles, is an embodiment of variation. Just as the Second Law dictates an increase in entropy, the world of design is characterised by continuous change, innovation, and the birth of new forms. Design, therefore, is not a static or rigid practice; it is a dynamic force that adapts, evolves, and thrives on diversity.

## **Design as a Reflection of Democracy**

One of the most profound connections between the Second Law and design is the relationship between diversity and democracy. The universe is, in essence, a system that

celebrates difference, change, and the coexistence of opposing forces. Democracy, at its heart, is about embracing diversity—of thought, culture, identity, and expression. It is about creating a space where individuals, each with their unique perspectives, can contribute to the greater whole.

The same is true of design. A school of design, for instance, is a place where diversity flourishes. It is a space where students, each coming with different backgrounds, experiences, and ideas, are encouraged to think critically, innovate, and collaborate. Just as the universe offers infinite possibilities for the arrangement of particles and systems, a school of design cultivates an environment where new solutions and approaches are not only possible but essential.

Democracy and design, in this sense, are synonyms. They both thrive on the idea that the world is not meant to be uniform or static but is a realm of continuous possibility and growth. In a truly democratic society, each voice is valued, and each individual contributes to the creation of a greater whole. Similarly, in design, every new idea, no matter how small or unconventional, adds to the richness and complexity of the final outcome. Design is a democratic act in itself, where every input, every difference, is essential to the creation of something new, vibrant, and relevant.

### **The Role of Education in Promoting Democratic Values through Design**

The role of design education in shaping democratic values cannot be overstated. In design schools, students learn not only the technical skills required to create and innovate but also the values that underpin democratic societies. These values include inclusivity, respect for diversity, and the importance of collective action in solving complex problems.

In the classroom, students are not merely taught how to design but how to engage with the world and with each other in a way that fosters understanding and cooperation. The act of designing is an inherently collaborative process. It requires working with others, understanding different viewpoints, and coming together to find solutions that are innovative, sustainable, and inclusive. This mirrors the democratic process, where cooperation and dialogue are essential to creating solutions that benefit the whole community.

Moreover, in design education, the teacher's role is not to impose a singular vision of what is right or correct but to encourage students to explore their own ideas, question existing assumptions, and contribute to a more expansive understanding of the world. The most successful designers are those who do not simply replicate the past but push the boundaries of what is possible, creating new forms and solutions that reflect the diversity of the world we live in.

### **The Cost of Rejecting Diversity**

While diversity is a driving force in both design and democracy, rejecting it comes at a high cost. When a society or a design system seeks to impose uniformity and suppress differences, it wastes energy, creates tension, and leads to a breakdown in social and creative cohesion. The Second Law of Thermodynamics makes it clear that trying to counteract the natural increase in entropy is not only futile but ultimately destructive. Just as nature will always move towards greater complexity and diversity, so too will human societies and creative practices.

This is particularly evident in our modern world, where the pressure to conform and homogenise often leads to a loss of individuality and creativity. In cities, for example, the desire to create uniform spaces—where everything is the same—often results in environments that are sterile, oppressive, and devoid of the vibrancy that comes from diversity. In design, this manifests as a tendency towards sameness and predictability, where new ideas are stifled in favour of safe, conventional approaches.

However, when we embrace diversity—whether in society, in design, or in education—we move closer to the natural order of things. The diversity of thought, experience, and approach is what enables progress, innovation, and harmony. Just as the Second Law ensures that entropy will always increase, it also guarantees that diversity will always lead to new possibilities and solutions. The key, then, is not to resist diversity but to embrace it fully, recognising that it is the driving force behind both creative and democratic progress.

### **Harmony in Diversity: The Designer's Role**

One of the key roles of the designer is to harmonise the diverse elements that exist in the world. This is a task that goes beyond simply solving problems or creating aesthetically pleasing objects. Designers are tasked with finding ways to bring together differing perspectives, cultures, and needs in a way that fosters harmony. This is not a simple balancing act but a creative process that involves understanding, empathy, and a deep respect for the differences that make us who we are.

Design, at its best, creates spaces where diversity is not just tolerated but celebrated. It seeks to bridge divides and build connections, fostering environments where individuals and ideas can coexist and flourish. In doing so, design mirrors the democratic process, where individuals from different backgrounds and viewpoints come together to create a better, more inclusive society.

In this sense, designers are not just creators of objects or systems; they are facilitators of change. They are the ones who bring about new ways of thinking, new ways of living, and new ways of being. They are the architects of a world that is in constant flux, a world that thrives on diversity and innovation.

**Conclusion: Design, Democracy, and the Future**

The relationship between design and democracy is deep and intrinsic. At its heart, both design and democracy are about embracing diversity, fostering innovation, and creating spaces where all voices are heard and valued. The Second Law of Thermodynamics serves as a powerful metaphor for this process, reminding us that diversity is not just natural but essential.

As we move forward into an increasingly complex and interconnected world, the principles of design and democracy will continue to shape our future. It is only through embracing diversity, innovation, and collaboration that we can hope to create a world that is not only sustainable but also just, inclusive, and harmonious. In this light, design is not just about creating objects or systems; it is about creating a world that reflects the true essence of our shared humanity—a world where democracy, diversity, and creativity are at the heart of everything we do.

# On the 50th Anniversary of Democracy in Portugal. Now more than ever.

..... Luigi Ferrara

Democracy etymologically refers to a system of government wherein power is vested in the people who as citizens participate and make decisions which are then upheld by laws. This contrasts with tyranny where power is concentrated in a single ruler and where there is no recourse against cruel and oppressive acts or controls. As a child, I remember my parents' frequent admonitions that described how lucky I was to have been born in a time of abundance and how grateful I should be to never have been a *subject* of a *sovereign* but rather a *citizen* of a *nation*. For them this distinction was so important because despite Italy having been a nation for many years the vestiges of authoritarianism and its many new guises, like the fascism they endured as children, had rendered their lives difficult and stifled opportunity for them.

My father especially still lived the life of a feudal serf as a child, almost 50 years after the founding of nation, and when ostensibly those shackles were supposed to have been removed. In watching the film *Happy as Lazzaro* directed by Alice Rohrwacher about peasants, who as late as 1977, had been confined to such a life, I was able to see a visual recreation of what my father's life must have been and why he especially valued the practice of democracy he had encountered when he immigrated to Canada. The vestiges of older systems oppressed both of my parents limiting their access to education, adversely influencing their health, nutrition and wellbeing and severely constraining the opportunities that they could access both in terms of social mobility. In my mother's case, the gender constraints prioritized men for education and limited her ability to progress at school despite her superior academic performance. When they immigrated to Canada, they never took for granted the possibility and beneficial effects of a high functioning democracy and the impact it had on their and their children's lives.

While the Italian and Canadian nations formed roughly at the same time it was clear to them that Canada had been able to progress more rapidly as a country by the structures and practices of a civil society that had worked tirelessly towards equity, social justice and human rights. My mother especially appreciated what she described as an open country where you were not constrained by social expectations and where people were

not trying to control you or pigeonhole you into a particular social schema. Ironically while Canada still technically had a Sovereign and we were her subjects, the framework of a constitutional democracy rendered most operative realities of a Canadian life free from those constraints and reflected a model wherein all were citizens. Ironically for both countries further expansion of their democratic structures was facilitated by legal changes. In Italy, the country became a republic in 1946 laying the foundation for the Italian miracle of the 1960's and in Canada, in 1951 we officially stopped being a colonial Dominion to evolve into a true nation. This is important as we often imagine democracy as fixed state when it is always a process of evolution and development.

This preamble points out the “sfumato” and the evolutionary quality of what it means to be a real democracy. Democracy affords many positive qualities and outcomes, amongst these, an increase in representation in decision making, the guarantee of rights, the rule of law, greater equity and expansion of wealth, access to public goods, educational attainment, social and physical mobility, freedom of expression and most importantly freedom of thought. At its best it generates a framework for the sharing of power through processes of participation and through limits and bounds around absolute power. When democracies are young these positive benefits are easily contrasted to periods of previous autocratic rule. The open society outperforms the control and order of a closed society. The essence of democracy is an open society where plurality co-exists and where differences are not rooted out.

As we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Portugal's democracy, which in its relatively short period of existence has seen Portugal transform itself as a country and embody many of the key values of democratic progress we can see the benefits of democratic practice. Portugal while a small nation, has built a vibrant and free economy, has increased the equity amongst its citizens, has achieved higher education attainment has become a source of innovation in arts, science and technology that follows from that. It has fostered openness to social justice and to the recognition of rights of the minorities and created a more open society that promotes diversity and inclusion.

While there is still much to do in fostering democratic transformation in the country, I believe what has been achieved, in such a short time, is something of a miracle and worthy of celebration by its citizens. Especially so, at a time when there is so much unrest globally and when, democracy, the rule of the people, is under attack from would be tyrants and complex global syndicates that want to exploit, divide and diminish human possibility to further a thirst for profit and to feed the greatest of human sins, greed.

For a democracy to continue to thrive certain key characteristics are needed. A degree of social cohesion is required for people to decide things and accept that they cannot always have all that they want. An acceptance of diversity and diverse perspectives is needed to learn from others and be willing to be open to personal transformation through dialogue.

Most critically, the willingness to share power with others and to transfer power between people and organizations is fundamental. Exhibiting behaviours such as a respect for other and for rules and the willingness to work within established frameworks and evolve them rather than overturn or demolish them are qualities that enable democratic participation. The ability to accept input, the desire to consult and not impose and the practice of fostering co-creation of frameworks and decision making is fundamental. This is a way of being and not just a list that is checked off. A true democracy is infused with authentic practices such as these. People can easily smell when these values are inauthentic or merely there as lip service.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of democracy is the creation of a sense of inclusive community where people of different backgrounds, wealth, status and belief coalesce around the common good rather than pursue their own exclusive interest. Richard Sennett has argued that true community involves people who are different and unique combining efforts for the benefit of all. I have experienced this working as a volunteer on Boards of Directors, in workplaces that are healthy and as a contributor to a project where we are all equally engaged in creating a successful outcome. Like a choir, democracy relies on all of us to create a harmonious sound and outcome. The greatest art form of democracies is perhaps the parade, whether it be to celebrate Santa Claus at Christmas or to support communities such as Pride in the summer reflects all aspects of society combining their efforts together for the purpose of elevating the common good.

The success of democracies like the proliferation of most things can generate key challenges that if not addressed will result in the very undermining of the open system that democratic institutions offer. At various points in history, we can see how the increasing representation and sharing of power fostered by democracy can place strains on the very structures that have enabled the diversity to thrive. Typically, as complexity increases and resources are constrained, people begin to complain of the time required by democratic processes and if poor decisions are made and accountability is not fostered people complain of the watering down of vision that comes from the processes that democracy engenders. People begin to identify how increases in power of minority interests are disproportionate and exaggerate the impact of true and even positive change complaining of the grinding of the gears of government in the face of the change being made.

People also complain of the dumbing down of decision making to appease parties which then drives patterns of diminishment of excellence or delaying of reckoning with problems that accumulate through indecision or through unwillingness to make difficult choices. Finally, the openness that democracy fosters can cause resentment or longing for “simpler” times when the apparent complexity of current structures causes nostalgia for “stronger” leadership that would cut through bureaucratic processes. It is easy to look throughout history and see the patterns of the rise and demise of democratic systems of governance, the swing from open societies to totalitarian ones. But this does not have to be the case.

We can develop new practices, for accomplishing the tasks of good governance and they can be taught and learned within the society.

I believe we must now move to a new form of governance that is not only about decision making, laws and parliamentary procedures, that is not about control, permission or hoarding of resources. Our emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century requires a form of government that is about elective contribution, co-creation, new ways of sharing, distribution and redistribution and ultimately new ways of empowering people. We must build new structures that move us from a world where we are governed to one in which we are all engaged. We must re-imagine a world where a few people sit in chambers determining how we should be governed to one where we all participate in imagining and prototyping the ways of being we need to more optimally share resources, enable self-actualization and balance a respect for all life on our planet and in the universe.

As Portugal moves into its next phase of growth of its democracy and as it tries to further the positive outcomes that it affords, I believe that developing the newer practices of democracy will be critical. The growth of the civil society will become a fundamental goal along with the understanding how we move to a place where citizens become participants in the process of collaboration that a democratic society should embody. This new north star will be developing the true technology behind democracy, which is that of distributed power and power sharing, amongst all members of a society.

# Design and Democracy: A Path Towards Active Citizenship and Systemic Innovation

..... Teresa Franqueira

## Introduction

In a time when democratic systems across various countries and regions face significant crises, the urgency for creating spaces of debate, tools that enable citizen participation through diverse forms of expression, and conditions for open and innovative collaboration becomes increasingly evident. These initiatives are crucial for the collective construction of solutions to social and political challenges.

Design plays an essential role in democracy, whether through its ability to disseminate messages, create more equitable systems where everyone has equal opportunities, or bring people together by fostering collaboration, participation, and active engagement in political decision-making processes. The goal is to build a more just and democratic society.

Reflecting on design and democracy, we tend to think the conversation naturally intersects with politics. Various authors, including Gui Bonsiepe (2005), Tony Fry (2010), Ezio Manzini, and Victor Margolin (2017), have explored the relationship between design and democracy with different interpretations.

These authors provide a comprehensive understanding of how design can engage with and contribute to democratic principles, emphasizing inclusivity, sustainability, and systemic change. These diverse perspectives underscore the omnipresence of design across all aspects of life.

When design operates collaboratively or within co-creation projects, it creates conditions for participation, empowering minorities and influencing how people interact, collaborate, and engage in social and political processes. This article focuses on how design can drive democracy by facilitating political participation and fostering active citizenship through spaces, tools, and systems that promote collaboration and civic activism.

### **Design and Active Citizenship**

Design has the potential to create conditions that encourage civic engagement, collaboration, and the development of inclusive and participatory communities. By designing environments and tools that foster collaboration and participation, it can help build more inclusive communities where every member has the opportunity to contribute to the common good. Such inclusion is essential for healthy democracies, ensuring that all citizens have a voice in community and political decision-making.

Processes of co-design enables citizens, designers, and governments to work together to identify problems and develop solutions collaboratively. This practice is particularly valuable in democratic processes, as it encourages direct citizen participation in shaping public policies, ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs addressed.

In these critical times, reflecting on and addressing significant shifts in peace, climate emergencies, and the challenges faced by refugees and migrants is vital. These pressing global issues demand innovative and collaborative solutions that need to be designed in a truly inter and transdisciplinary way.

### **Design and Public Spaces**

Designing public spaces with educational and cultural environments is fundamental for fostering active citizenship. By creating spaces that promote learning, knowledge exchange, and critical reflection, design encourages the development of informed and engaged citizens. Museums, libraries, and cultural centers exemplify spaces where design can promote active participation, providing opportunities for citizens to learn and discuss political and social issues.

Public spaces also significantly influence how people engage with democracy. The design of public urban spaces, for instance, can create places that encourage social interaction and community participation. Squares, parks, and community centres are gathering places for exchanging ideas, discussing collective concerns, and participating in communal activities. Properly designed spaces, with universal accessibility and social areas responding to community needs, invite active and engaged use, encouraging civic participation.

Design is a powerful tool for promoting diversity and equity. By considering the needs of all community members—such as people with disabilities, the elderly, children, and minorities—design creates environments where everyone feels represented and encouraged to participate. Concepts like “walkable cities,” where urban design prioritizes pedestrians and cyclists over automobiles, create safe and accessible spaces that facilitate social interaction and community cohesion, strengthening local democracy.

One example is tactical urbanism, which involves temporary design interventions in urban spaces to engage the community in decisions about public space use and organization.

Projects such as temporary plazas, community gardens, and pedestrian crossings encourage active participation in urban planning processes, fostering social innovation that strengthens community and civic engagement.

These projects also demonstrate how design can test new ideas on a small scale, gathering direct community feedback before implementing permanent solutions. This iterative approach ensures that solutions align with the real needs of the population, fostering genuine social innovation.

### **Design for Social Innovation**

Design's role in social innovation within democratic processes is pivotal. It provides tools and methodologies to rethink and restructure how societies organize institutions, make decisions, and encourage citizen participation. Social innovation involves new ideas, practices, and solutions that address social needs more effectively than traditional approaches. In a democratic context, social innovation seeks to enhance inclusion, equity, and civic participation, positioning design as a transformative force.

Social innovation in democratic processes begins with creating new methods and platforms for participation. These leverage design's power to transform interactions between citizens and governments. Traditional democracies often limit citizen participation to voting, which alone does not ensure sustained civic engagement. Design can change this scenario by creating spaces and tools that enable continuous, interactive, and collaborative participation.

Another critical dimension of design's role in democratic social innovation is building cohesive and participatory communities. Design can foster interaction between citizens, encouraging collaboration and dialogue. Rather than centralized, top-down democratic models, design can support decentralized and participatory networks, where citizens connect directly to exchange ideas and collaboratively address social issues.

Design plays a crucial role in social innovation within democratic processes. It not only optimizes existing systems but also transforms how democracies function. By creating new participation models, fostering community cohesion, promoting inclusion, and testing solutions through co-creation and prototyping, design is central to building more inclusive, participatory, and resilient democracies. This relationship between design and democracy transcends aesthetics or functionality, serving as a cornerstone for constructing fairer and more equitable societies.

Initiatives like participatory budgets, where citizens vote directly on projects to be implemented in their communities, are concrete examples of how design play an important role promoting political participation. These platforms not only allow citizens to express preferences but also encourage debate and collaboration among diverse groups.

The design of interfaces that facilitate discussion, idea exchange, and collective solution-building is essential for strengthening digital democracy.

These platforms for digital participation—such as public consultation apps or participatory budgeting tools—exemplify how design fosters social innovation in democratic processes. These systems are designed to be inclusive, accessible, and interactive, enabling citizens to actively engage in political decisions and contribute to public policy development. Designing the spaces and platforms that allows civic participation enables more horizontal and participatory decision-making processes, increasing the legitimacy of governmental actions.

### Conclusion

While the world is inundated with distressing reports of conflicts, there is hope in grassroots movements advocating for democracy, dialogue, reconciliation, and social cohesion.

Design plays a pivotal role in fostering peace, creating bridges for cross-cultural exchange, conflict resolution, and community empowerment. As a catalyst for social innovation, design addresses interconnected challenges like peace, climate change, and refugee issues. However, the design community must take bolder steps to meet these pressing needs.

In democratic contexts, co-creation should be used to experiment new formats of public participation, public deliberation, voting methods, or approaches to community consultation. By allowing controlled experimentation, design provides a way to continuously improve democratic processes, ensuring solutions are effective and sustainable over time.

In sum, design can be a powerful tool for **systemic innovation**, reimagining and restructuring the systems that sustain democracies. Rather than merely improving existing processes, design can radically transform how democratic institutions operate. This includes a role in not only rethinking and reshaping forms of political representation, governance structures, or voting systems that better serve citizens and their collective aspirations, but mainly designing systems and places where people can participate in public life promoting peace and inclusion, equity and democracy.

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# Design Education and Democracy: A Call Beyond Profit

..... **Koray Gelmez**

In a world increasingly driven by market values, design education stands at a crossroads. Will it serve the logic of economic growth alone—or can it become a transformative force for democracy? Drawing on Martha C. Nussbaum’s powerful warning in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, we are reminded that a narrow focus on profit and productivity threatens to erode the foundations of democratic life. Education, she argues, must not be reduced to mere training for the global marketplace; it must also cultivate the skills that make democracy possible—critical thought, imagination, empathy, and the capacity for self-reflection (Nussbaum, 2010).

Design education, when understood as more than professional preparation, is a fertile ground for these democratic capacities. It asks students to interpret needs, understand the experiences of others, and envision how things might be otherwise. In this way, it directly supports what Nussbaum calls “the narrative imagination”—the ability to imagine what it is like to be in someone else’s shoes (p. 95). This is central not only to good design but to democratic citizenship itself. A designer who cannot imagine the lives of others risks becoming a technician of exclusion. A citizen without imagination risks becoming indifferent to injustice.

Yet, as Nussbaum warns, these capacities are under threat. Around the world, we witness the shrinking of educational spaces that foster creativity and critique. Design schools, too, are vulnerable to the pressures of employability metrics, marketable portfolios, and commercially viable outcomes. When education is valued only for how much it contributes to a country’s economic growth, the deeper purpose of forming ethical, reflective, and socially engaged individuals is lost.

In the design domain, Gui Bonsiepe similarly critiques this market-driven shift, noting that contemporary design discourse is often dominated by branding, lifestyle, and image-making. This emphasis on style over substance, he argues, obscures the transformative potential of design—the possibility of reducing domination and increasing participation through thoughtful, inclusive, and problem-solving practices (Bonsiepe, 2006, p. 29).

To resist this trend, we must reaffirm design education as a humanistic and civic practice—a space where the values of democracy are not only discussed but enacted.

John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* further grounds this vision. Dewey saw education as a living, participatory process—the means by which societies reproduce and renew their democratic ideals. He viewed schools as communities, where students learn how to live with others, engage in shared inquiry, and experience the responsibilities of freedom (Dewey, 1916). In this sense, design education is not just a preparation for future practice but a form of democratic life in itself—one where students learn by making, by collaborating, and by reflecting on the ethical consequences of their actions.

Dewey gives us a vivid image of what such learning might look like. He imagines a school where education is “a mode of life,” not an external preparation for it—a place where children are “young animals” learning through doing, not “theoretical spectators” waiting to be filled with knowledge (Dewey, 1916, pp. 16–17). Learning, for Dewey, is rooted in “fruitful experiences”, in experimentation, inquiry, and collective problem-solving. Design education practices this closely: students iterate prototypes, explore materials, and engage in critical dialogue. When education is reduced to technical training or passive reception, it fails to nurture the full person—and the full citizen.

Paulo Freire further illuminates the democratic potential of education when it is grounded in dialogue, reflection, and action. Freire cautions against the “banking model” of education, in which knowledge is deposited into passive students, reinforcing hierarchy and conformity. Instead, he advocates for a “problem-posing” education—where learners engage critically with their world, recognize injustice, and participate in transforming their conditions (Freire, 1970). In design education, this means moving beyond fixed briefs and stylistic solutions to engage with real, complex, lived challenges. When students question, make, and reflect together, they are not only learning design—they are practicing freedom. As Freire argues, “Education is the practice of freedom, as opposed to education as the practice of domination” (p. 81). In this light, even the small acts of critique, collaboration, or participation in public space become gestures of democratic learning.

In recent times in Turkey, we have seen design students themselves stepping beyond studio walls—gathering, questioning, participating. Whether through posters, installations, or simply showing up, they signal that design education can nurture not just makers, but mindful observers and responsive citizens. Without claiming certainty or taking sides, we might gently ask: What does it mean when design students find themselves outside the classroom, participating in public life? Perhaps it is a quiet reminder that democracy is not only learned—it is lived.

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# Designers as Politicians

## ..... Paul Hekkert

One of the summer hits this year in the Netherlands is a song by Ammar with the unattractive title “Tax administration” (close to one million streams on Spotify, September 2024). The song’s main message, it is very expensive and useless to pay taxes, like “carrying water to the sea”, and the singer declares, “I will no longer participate”. People who love this song see the Dutch tax system as a monster, a governmental organization that is after their money that they could spend much better (on) themselves. They fail or refuse to see the bigger picture and the collective concerns that are paid for by our taxes. Our taxes.

The popularity of this song is characteristic for the present political situation all over Europe. Populist politicians like Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Giorgia Meloni (Italy) or Geert Wilders (the Netherlands) win elections by dismissing the establishment—and their institutions— and promising people what they want and what they think they need –it’s one of the pitfalls of this area that we tend to conflate the two (Maté, 2022). These politicians try to please a group of relatively less educated and more nationalistic and unsatisfied civilians, and it is presumptuous to see how they claim to represent the voice of all people. They justify their political choices by arguing that it is the politician’s duty to serve the people and listening to them is the (only) way to bridge the gap between civilians and government. So wrong.

First of all, the logic of populism is based on the false assumption that people are generally dissatisfied because this gap is too big. I would argue that the gap has become too small! People’s anger is fuelled by politicians who are wittingly trying to close the gap by talking to people and promising them they will solve all their problems. Talking to citizens is of course a great thing, and every politician should do so on a daily basis, if only to understand the sentiments in society. But giving people false hope that their individual problems can easily be solved, that politics can make them feel better, is a guarantee for disappointment and frustration.

Time to explore the analogy with design. Pleasing people has also been of central concern to designers for many decades. Year after year, designers were taught to capture the needs and wants of consumers through user studies, market research, consumer panels and many other techniques. And if they package those needs into products that are also beautiful and usable, people are presented with seemingly irresistible options. The logic for the industry is plain and simple: if products sell well, they make a profit, the shareholders are satisfied, and the company can grow, ad infinitum.

We have reached the limits of growth. In our relentless desire to please consumers, designers have created a value system whose operating principles are having extremely detrimental effects on our environment, our social fabric, our health, and our well-being. These unintended consequences have become increasingly visible and designers are aware of this, more than aware. Ten, fifteen years ago, most designers aspired to work in industry, to design a cool thing that would solve a problem, make people happy, and sell millions. These days, designers want to “do good”—make an impact, take responsibility, and contribute to a better world.

Ten years ago, I got involved in the establishment of a new design school in Noida, India, called The Design Village. In this school we train designers to take responsibility for their work and the impact it has on society at large. In fact, a specific view on the kind of impact they aim for (i.e., a vision) is the generator of their design process, call it design for social innovation and transformation. When I came back to the school after some years, I visited the bathroom where I found a poster with my picture and the following quote: “Politicians are the designers of the past, designers are the politicians of the future”.

One may now ask, this vision, or view on what is needed in a future world, what is it based on? Some in the design field make the same mistake as (populist) politicians: We need to go to the people and ask them what they want. Luckily however, more and more designers understand that to attain a sustainable and just society, we need to profoundly understand what moves and motivates people, how their behaviour and attitudes are shaped (so that we can affect them), and what people’s real needs are, such as relatedness and autonomy. If we design from these values and principles, we can design a world that is worth living in, with a fair tax system, good air quality, and a properly functioning public service. We can even design democracy itself...

A few years ago, we designed an alternative democratic system that could very well eliminate the most perverse mechanisms operating in the current system (see this TEDx movie): To Vote on your Birthday! Instead of sending people to the voting booth every four years (as is common practice in most countries), they are invited to cast a vote each year, electronically, and on their birthday. After four years, all votes are counted on a pre-designated “counting day.”

I think this is a beautiful concept and not only for its potential impact on the democratic process—which is also beautiful, but only in a metaphorical sense. The beauty of the concept resides in its efficiency: the intervention itself is minimal, but the consequences for every stakeholder in the democratic process are considerable. Think of it: citizens’ choices would be less influenced by current affairs, the media would have no interest in making mountains out of molehills, and politicians would stick to a long-term policy for their country. The concept fits the aesthetic principle of Maximum Effect for Minimum Means (Da Silva et al., 2016). We aesthetically prefer solutions that are seen as efficient

ways to realise major goals. The MEMM principle not only governs the design of objects, concepts, and services, it also governs the formulation of mathematical proofs, solutions in engineering, or the use of metaphors in literary texts and poetry. These kinds of creations are so good that they look deceptively simple.

In 2019, Nynke Tromp and I published a book on social design in which we discuss strategies to deal with value conflicts between immediate gratification and long-term, collective benefits (Tromp & Hekkert, 2019). These strategies are not recipes, but rather generic procedures towards achieving a goal. If people do not voluntarily engage in behaviour that will benefit their well-being in the long run, we can help them by making a healthy alternative more attractive. Elderly people with dementia, for example, are often inactive and socially isolated. Hester la Riche (XX) found a way to capture their attention and engage their bodies in enjoyable, healthy physical movements through her use of technology and gamification principles. This magic table has been a success both socially and economically: the company that was built around its production, Active Cues, now has 50 employees, and it has sold more than 2000 consoles to elderly care centres around the world.

The hardest and most desirable strategy is to resolve the conflict: the desired behaviour becomes the new normal thanks to the designed product. Many of us love Netflix. But does anyone feel good the day after binge watching five episodes of their favourite series? That's what Netflix wants us to do, and they have built in all kinds of mechanisms to keep our attention. Our student Matthijs Huijbregts decided that video streaming services could be designed differently... The service allows people to keep on doing what they love to do most—consume media, watch movies, be entertained—but in a way that also makes them feel good the next day. Matthijs is seeking to maximize our well-being, and to achieve this he relied on two decades of research in positive psychology, research that has carefully laid bare the mechanisms and activities underlying our long-term happiness (see XX).

When politicians are only driven by the next elections and fail to advocate the long-term view and interests of future generations, designers have the capacity and responsibility to redesign our environment, technology and operating systems in such a way that people “do the right thing”. The ‘only’ thing that needs to happen is that designers get into the position to do what needs to be done (it took a few decades before companies discovered the value of design-driven innovation; it may take another few decades before the public sector embraces the power of design) and are equipped with proper tools and methods to act efficiently. To that end, we need to strengthen our knowledge base and Key Enabling Methodologies, the methods change makers, such as designers, can employ to accelerate our transitions towards a just and sustainable future.

And perhaps, our next prime minister will be a designer.



# Universal Design, democracy and opposites. Design and autonomy; democracy and autonomy.

..... **Richard Herriott**

In this essay I would like to use the framework of Universal Design (UD) to consider the way in which design has attempted to get to grips with democracy. Since design sprawls in various directions, I would like to focus on that part with which I am most familiar, industrial design. I also consider how the inclusion of stakeholders, of negotiation and compromise contrasts with decision-making left in the hands of the few, both in design and in governance.

UD, as I will argue, serves as a model of inclusive and democratic decision-making, and as such is an instructive model for egalitarian-minded democrats. Persson *et al.* (2015) in their essay, “Universal design, inclusive design, accessible design, design for all: different concepts—one goal?”, note there is some discussion as what accessibility but the following definition of UD can be taken as a good point of reference. UD is, according to Connell *et al.*’s *Principles of Universal Design* (1996) ‘*the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design*’

Design can be defined innumerable ways. This is mine: to design is to define the specification of visually coherent objects that satisfy human emotional and rational needs. UD (or Inclusive Design or Design for All) brings to the foreground the particular emotional and rational needs of people whose capability is different from the mainstream. The process is dense with user-involvement which results not only in a well-specified design but acceptance of that design. Governance also requires acceptance of the outcomes and that they are just.

UD is not only about democracy in the sense of having a say, having a vote. One can have democracy without much equality. UD is concerned with design for material fairness and for social equality. So, what I am interested in is the relation of UD to democracy coupled with egalitarian notions of social justice. This contrasts with modes of design that are reliant on singular personalities and the exclusion of stakeholders. And it contrasts with modes of governance reliant on decree and the values of few decision-makers.

Design processes operate at the intersection of the qualitative, quantitative and intersubjective. I explain to students that UD adds a moral and ethical dimension to this: designing to support the autonomy and agency of the widest range of capabilities. Indeed, Bonsiepe in *Design and Democracy* (2006) draws attention to the concern that design and democracy can\* share for autonomy. UD outcomes support democracy through enabling individuals to participate in society. This also supports the emotional need for autonomy.

UD is democratic and egalitarian at the obvious level of providing fair access to goods and services people can use without assistance. This is what distinguishes it from what one might call standard design which might correspond to democracy that is indifferent to egalitarian social justice. Thinking along these lines a case could be made that there might be a parallels between the evolution of design and the evolution of the distribution of decision-making power. And having made those parallels we might reflect on the condition of egalitarianism and democracy today.

Borrowing loosely from Broadbent's (2003) essay on generations in design methodology, we could see design evolving in the direction of more stakeholder involvement. This corresponds towards the process of the increasing distribution of decision-making power e.g. from monarchy to limited suffrage to full universal suffrage. Arnstein's (1969) well-known concept of the ladder of citizen participation echoes this. There is partnership, delegation and citizen control near the apex of stakeholder involvement. In design processes, this is manifested as designers engaging in an active and reciprocal way with users. Tonkinwise (2019) discussing the defence of democracy writes "Over the course of the history of modern design, designers have learned that better quality decisions come from increasing the involvement of those impacted by those decisions: contextual inquiry evolving to user-trialled design and then ethnography informed human-centered designing and these days co-design". In UD the user selection is critical – the users' physical and cognitive capabilities are essential for the design to be meaningfully universal/inclusive. In democracy, this corresponds to a broad and informed electorate.

It is the work of a considerably longer text than this to trace the way ideas of egalitarianism (fair outcomes) and democracy (participation in decision-making) have affected design. So here I am operating on the assumption that ideals of democracy and egalitarianism that moved design from its "monarchy period" (the designer as artist and manufacturer as dictator) to its social democratic period. The results have been somewhat

mixed it is true. While in the developed industrial West most countries have representative democracy it is not true to say most design is representative, egalitarian or democratic. This is especially true of building design (“architecture”) and urban planning where the citizen-user is almost always an insignificant player – if not an obstacle - in the disposal and distribution of resources. In product design, universal accessibility improved towards the end of the 1990s only to seem to deteriorate: interface design from cookers to car interiors seems especially poorly adapted to users with non-mainstream capabilities. Further, digitalization has meant more of our interactions with the state and private enterprise are mediated by screen-based technology, a point made as far back as 2005 by Wallis. The pace of change of this technology means that almost all users will be eventually left behind by new functionality and interfaces that defeat their cognitive and physical capability. That is to say, there is an age point when new designs confound the user such as the unusable on-line bank or hard-to-fathom control on a device. Even as knowledge of how to enact democratic egalitarianism and how to enact UD accumulates, change is slow or worse, it is negative change, according to the UN (2020).

UD takes its inspiration from democratic ideals coupled with notions of egalitarianism. There is possible feedback into the democratic model if attention is paid not just to the means (stakeholder involvement) but also the ends. This leads to the question, what do we do to make democracy more design-like? The lesson from UD, which is design intensified, (more of all the things which distinguish design from decision by decree and from engineering) is to strengthen the connections between each stage of the decision-making process. Tonkinwise set out quite a long list of quite specific steps were required to protect democracy. Tonkinwise also argued that some of the steps to protect democracy were paradoxically undemocratic (the role of experts, compulsory voting, regulating campaign financing). I contend that while some of these specific are important, they would emerge from a democracy informed by UD thinking. And some of the seemingly undemocratic elements are not really undemocratic at all once they are agreed to by participants: agreement to include expert opinion, for example, or the model of the referee in sporting competition.

Taking inspiration from the intensity of user-involvement of UD, there can be a democratic process and structure that improves on the current widespread system of periodic electoral polling. The argument is that democracy requires inclusion. In my own work I have seen evidence that the path toward the optimum design specification involves user-involvement all the way through the design process. By the same token, in inclusive democratic process will take into account stakeholders’ material and psychological needs. Important in this is the idea that the outcome is seen to be fair even if some requests are not complied with. What seems to be the issue with mistrust in democracy among the young and among the working class is the belief others are making unaccountable decisions.

Handing power back to stakeholders, so decisions are made by many not the few, is the antidote both to design exclusion and political exclusion. It would also counter the unsettling revival of interest in authoritarian political philosophies described in “Carl Schmitt and the Politics of Identity” by Mehring (2019) that seek to solve system crises by concentrating power in the hands of one person. Politics is essentially a process for finding solutions to societal problems. It can result in messy compromises and sometimes inaction – the climate crisis is a chronic case of this. Theorists such as Schmitt and those who prefer concentration of power offer complicated arguments that can be summed up as “just getting it done”. From the small scale to the large scale, allowing few deciders “to just get it done” is more than likely to produce hazardous results. Mao’s “smash sparrows” campaign led to the 1959-1960 famine. LeCorbusier’s singular vision for Paris would have involved wholesale demolition of a large tract of land without even the benefits of residential light infill that were promised. Conversely, design approaches to democracy diffuse power just as design approaches diffuse the tendency to produce exclusionary products and services.

Thinking about how UD – maximum inclusion – generates knowledge and increases the likelihood of the acceptance of outcomes provides a vivid counter-example to arguments for anti-democratic concentration of power.

# Making Design Public: Materiality, Transition and Democracy

..... **Guy Julier**

Portugal's ending of 41 years of dictatorship in 1974 was the first wave in a set of political changes that subsequently coursed around the world. Other countries that broke from autocratic regimes include Greece (1974), Spain (1975), Argentina (1983), Brazil (1985) and Chile (1989). And then, of course, there were the political transitions to democracy that swept across the Soviet Bloc in the 1990s. These were propelled not just by resistance to political repression but also by a realisation that the actual material circumstances of everyday life did not match up to the conditions that their governments promised. Shortages of goods, poor housing provision, pollution, chaotic transport infrastructures and degraded public spaces clearly signified that their old systems weren't working.

The cultural avant-garde was often at the forefront of revealing these contradictions. In Barcelona, during the 1970s, the magazine *Serra d'Or* carried regular commentaries and editorials by architects, art historians and designers that critiqued the poverty of material conditions under the Francoist dictatorship. Likewise, in 1980s Hungary, the *samizdat* cultural publication *Beszélő* took on Soviet-dominated Kádárism with similar objections.

It is therefore not surprising to see how design often took on an emblematic role in the political, cultural and economic transitions that followed the collapse of authoritarian regimes. Accumulated knowledge of what could be otherwise during the dark years of dictatorship could be made real in a new landscape of democracy. Perhaps the best-known example here is in the renovation of Barcelona's public realm in the mid-1980s. The visionary leadership of Barcelona's elected socialist mayor, Pasqual Maragall, and spearheaded by city architect Oriol Bohigas, its drab parks, plazas and leftover spaces were of urban renewal rapidly transformed into stunning displays of contemporary design. It also revindicated a sense of public life after decades of suppression. It thus served both practical and symbolic purposes in tidying the city up while nurturing the importance of participation in civil society through giving importance to the design of its material spaces and infrastructures. In such ways, political transformations are made material in everyday life. Democracy was therefore made sense of in what was visible and useable in the street.

By the late-1980s, Barcelona's transformation had found a new context in preparations for the 1992 Olympics. This combined with a need to communicate a narrative for the city in a global economy as its traditional manufacturing base contracted. Its renewed urban landscape subsequently became a reference point, not just for countries undergoing political changes, but in the wider transitions provoked by post-industrialisation. The 'Barcelona model' exported easily and provided a blueprint for the revival of struggling post-industrial towns and cities seeking attract new, inward investment. From the late 1990s, urban design took on a central role in European regeneration, gentrification processes and, ultimately, in raising land value in favour of property development.

This shift in function of urban design, from being in the service of public life to a motor for real estate development, services the neoliberal logics of financialisation. A key problem in late capitalism is in finding ways of dealing with surplus capital: investment banks, pension funds, insurance companies, mutual trusts and other investors accumulate money which has to go somewhere to render further profit. Geographer David Harvey (2001) has maintained that much urbanisation functions as a 'spatial fix' in that new developments – such as shopping malls, hotels, office blocks, multi-storey carparks and, increasingly, housing schemes – *produce* locations for investment. They make spaces for capital to be located, both metaphorically and literally: money is fixed somewhere, but also the problem of where to put it is fixed. Arguably, much property development isn't 'needed' or even 'desired' by citizens: it is there for the sake of investment. Urban design plays a role in establishing bridgeheads in these processes, signalling new places for speculation and the realisation of future value.

This 'fix' operates in other ways. New markets made available by transitions to globalised, liberal democracy also provided fresh destinations for capital. In the 1980s, Spain, Portugal and Greece, in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s and South-East Asia in the 2000s, all saw leaps in foreign capital investment, materialised through new shopping malls and hotels. But we can also talk of a 'technological fix'. New gadgets, systems of automation, digital services and infrastructures and so on – the highly designed stuff that increasingly fills out our daily lives and supposedly makes them easier – can operate as useful destinations for capital seeking investment opportunities. Finance therefore makes modernity. Spectacular city skylines, punctuated by the silhouettes of iconic skyscrapers; waterfront developments, with their signature paving and lighting schemes, that are infilled with prime-value apartments or novelty restaurants; delivery services combining digital devices and infrastructures with gig-workers on e-bikes that provide instantaneous fulfilment: these are all created by the insatiable and unending quest of financialisation. Moments of beauty and wonder sometimes result. But also, processes of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003: 149) occur where, for example, independent shops and restaurants are squeezed out by global franchises, or citizen access to common land is restricted.

Beyond the voting urns, democracy is also about equal access participation in public life, such as the right to assemble or the right to information that affects people's lives. Henri Lefebvre's notion of a 'right to the city', coined in 1968, addresses the rights of all citizens to decide on the shaping of their city, town, village or whichever settlement they inhabit. Nonetheless, many who have been involved in resisting a local, unpopular property development plan will tell you how decision-making is often 'black-boxed' with little information available to ordinary people. The motivations, interests and implications of a proposed scheme are often opaque, while any possible alternatives remain far in the background. Extending to the wider financial world that supports this, its complexity and jargon seems deliberately placed out of reach so that it gets to write its own rules (see Lanchester 2015). Despite its claims for the freedom of the marketplace, neoliberalism seems to be profoundly undemocratic at times.

The long decade of the 1970s included a lively attention to the connections between material conditions and participation in society among researchers. For instance, writing in 1979, sociologist Peter Townsend defined poverty as determined, or not, by people's command of resources and access to 'the customs, activities and pleasures generally available within society' (Townsend 1979: 61). His exhaustive survey and ensuing arguments set a global benchmark for thinking about poverty in terms of the material requirements necessary to meaningfully take part in public life. It begs the question as to what people really need, both in their private goods and in the public worlds they inhabit. Some of this is a matter of social policy, but also of understanding the material world. So, what can designers do to reinvigorate this sensibility?

Historically, the design profession has defined itself largely through its ability to problem-solve or, at least, make circumstances better. This comes from its own historicity, as in, 'this is what we do...it's our tradition, inherited from the Bauhaus and before'. This is core to the self-advocacy of designers to the extent that, sometimes, problem-solving has become an end in itself (Lorusso 2024). Problems are often 'discovered' or invented, even, to be tackled. Designers fix problems which are often just technological or spatial fixes for surplus capital. Of course, this is not how technological innovations or urban developments that 'solve problems' are presented to us. An occasional, additional role of design, along with branding, advertising and marketing, is to obfuscate the economic processes and interests that are at play.

There are some exceptions, however. The Fairphone mobile phone brand does the opposite: all the sources financial investment, the supply chains, the assembly processes and locations and, indeed, their products' internal workings are made transparent. Indeed, this instance might serve for role for design in doing just this – making things public. Equally, designers might consider a role in bringing to visibility those background machinations of systems, products and services that are usually covered up. Design then becomes a mode of investigation and communication of the results.

Moving on from this, what if design was entirely *reflexive*? What if the conditions of its own operation, its many motivations, interests, forms of expertise and structural conditions were laid bare through the design work itself? What if these were made publicly accessible within the design? In so doing, users, consumers, communities of interest – however you wish to describe those outside the producing systems of design – might then have access to a fuller understanding of what design and, indeed, corporations, investors or, even, governments are up to. Surely, that is just one way of addressing the layers of disinformation that weaken democracy. This is, perhaps, a utopian suggestion, but a next step would be to explore how this might be made material.

Fifty years on from the Portugal's Carnation Revolution, the word 'transition' has re-entered the media lexicon. Used in the 1980s to signify the transformation of political processes towards democratic accountability and civic engagement, it soon became employed to signify economic, technology and cultural changes in a globalising system as well. Most recently, however, 'transition' has been attached to environmental challenges, as in, 'the transition to a carbon-neutral society'. Whatever this ultimately might look like, it is unlikely to happen without knowing what is holding such a transition back. Part of this knowledge-building is in the deep knowledge-building of design culture. But beyond the academic papers that result, such an understanding might be worked into design practice itself to reveal the conditions of its own making. Rendering the material circumstances of everyday life more legible and more knowable might be one of the keys to a more just transition.

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# Strengthening Democracy through the Design of Public Services

..... Sabine Junginger

*“Properly understood, democracy should not even be  
‘rule of the majority’, if that means that minorities’  
interests are ignored completely.”<sup>1</sup>*

To think that designers will be saving the world is a level of arrogance and path for self-fulfilling failure I do not subscribe. However, being able to remain hopeful, devising courses of action to change an existing situation into an improved one as Herbert Simon proclaimed, does remain one of the hallmarks of our discipline. I would add a willingness to embrace complexities in all their dimensions rather than seeking to simplify or reduce them as many other disciplines are prone to. Coupled with a strong ethic of care, this provides the foundation for designers’ engagement with the challenges of pluralistic democracies at large and contested matters of inclusive governance. In the words of the Council of Europe, a democracy, ‘at least in theory, is government on behalf of all the people, according to their “will”. Democracy, the Council goes on, should not be mistaken for or reduced to “the rule of the majority” – if that means that minorities’ interests are ignored completely.’

Designers have long understood the relevance of their work to the political domain. This very collection of essays on 50 years of Design and Democracy provides a testament. However, for the most part, design research and design practice in the context of government and governing have remained almost as invisible as design itself. Design, especially systemic and institutional designs are invisible observed Lucius Burckhardt in 1980.<sup>2</sup> Seven years later, Peter Gorb and Angela Dumas pointed to the existence of “Silent Designers” and “silent design” in business organizations.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/democracy\\_quote\\_by\\_Former\\_Secretary-General\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_Nations\\_Kofi\\_Annan](https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/democracy_quote_by_Former_Secretary-General_of_the_United_Nations_Kofi_Annan) [accessed December 9 2024]

<sup>2</sup> In reference to his essay “Design is invisible, 1980, [https://www.lucius-burckhardt.org/English/Text/Lucius\\_Burckhardt.html](https://www.lucius-burckhardt.org/English/Text/Lucius_Burckhardt.html) [accessed December 9, 2024]

But it was the turn to human-centred design as a research area that took a torch to hidden designs in institutional and organisational systems. Its focus on defining human experiences and human interactions in everyday life allowed for the exploration of design in government where hidden designs and silent designers shape how the one may live with the many.

Every government relates and connects with the people it seeks to govern through a range of products and services. These products and services are conceived of, planned, developed, delivered, and maintained by government organizations, agencies and institutions. The values, norms, and beliefs of those who rule and govern are expressed, manifested and communicated through these products and services. When public services work, they strengthen institutions, maintain and foster trust in government. High quality public services strengthen democracy when people feel they belong and are being part of a community, of the society they live in. They contribute to social justice and inter-generational fairness. They are the ones that serve the present generations of citizens and other members of the public in ways that secure their future. They are the ones that invite, engage and enable people to participate in addressing the complex challenges humanity and the planet face.

Quality public services are one of the key areas for designers to contribute directly to democracy. If we keep in mind that even the best public policy fails in the absence of reliable, accessible, and meaningful public services that support its implementation, we begin to grasp the significance of service design not only in strengthening public institutions but also in strengthening democracy.

How we go about designing, delivering and maintaining high quality public services in the future emerges as one of the key challenges we face today. In most European countries, the public sector is under enormous pressure. A retirement wave due to an ageing work force is threatening the viability of public service provisions in German, Austria and Switzerland. The numbers are staggering – in Germany alone, between 40 and 60 percent of the public servants will leave for their pensions within the next ten years. At the same time, citizens and other members of the public are aging, too – requiring more public services than ever before. Think health care, think pensions, think transportation and mobility. Think absence of public services. Think of what may replace them or fill the gaps left when public services disappear. Think of its implications for democracy.

Once again, technology promises an easy way out. The digital transformation and the AI revolution offers ample opportunities for designers, especially service designers, UX and interaction designers to envision and develop novel services that can make up for the lack of (wo-)manpower in our existing bureaucracies. Their successful innovations will play a role in strengthening institutions and trust in government. But as is so common with technological based solutions, they have an expiration date. One-stop-shop digital government services are brilliant for most of our life. This may not be so when we age

ourselves and find that we no longer can digest the next new technology and the latest update of our governments public service tool. Coming to think of it, digital and AI dependency as we are entering into ageing societies may present us with new formidable challenges for design and democracy.

With this in mind, we are reminded about the importance of designing in, with, and for government. It is our call to engage in matters of design from policymaking to policy implementation. Identifying as a human-centred designer requires a general belief that most people can and will do good and that positive change is possible. Both commitments align human-centred design with democratic efforts.

Democracy, as Kofi Annan explains in the quote below, does not come natural to people nor the societies they build and live within. Instead, democracy is something people need to be educated about and trained in.

**“No one is born a good citizen, no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth.”<sup>3</sup>**

Kofi Annan’s observation takes on new meaning when we consider the demographic trend of ageing societies. Soon, young voters will be outnumbered by their elder citizens. Issues that matter for someone being in an early phase of life differ from those of someone who has seen and done it all. How can democracy still be democratic when a given number of voters may no longer get to be heard and seen? How may we go about ensuring that future generations have a say in designing future-fit policies for generations to come? How may design contribute to assuage this threat?

In my view, we must invest in learning new ways of transdisciplinary co-design and co-creation. The way to achieve actionable outcomes that address the polycrisis requires inter-generational development. We need to figure out how to invite, engage and enable different generations to work together to invent and develop new possibilities. The benefits from this approach are multiple. Among them I envision we reconnect generations that have begun to see themselves as polar opposites in the fight for rare and scarce resources, we provide meaningful and purposeful engagement for elderly, and we allow younger people a glimpse into their older selves. In turn, we increase a sense of belonging for all involved and with that social cohesion.

The gravity of the generational tensions is not lost on to the EU Commission. A new Commissioner for Inter-Generational Fairness has just been appointed. My point from

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/democracy\\_quote\\_by\\_Former\\_Secretary-General\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_Nations,\\_Kofi\\_Annan](https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/democracy_quote_by_Former_Secretary-General_of_the_United_Nations,_Kofi_Annan).

a design perspective is that we need to go beyond thinking about past and future generations when new policies are decreed or enacted and when new public services are being developed. There is a bit of a tendency to go back to designing “for” the young and “for” the elderly. I would very much like to see how design brings generations together for specific research projects. How we will do this will require ambition, dedication, creativity, humility, and courage. So really, nothing new but a shift in focus to ensure we pay attention that we do not end up with the rule of the majority ignores minorities interests completely. Instead, we will enrich people’s lives across the different life phases and in between create new public values while guarding those we hold dear.

In my mind, design holds the key to achieve sustainable changes on systemic levels, with national, regional and local governments presenting such systems that at the same time are elements of systems on a global and planetary scale. In all of this, inter-generational issues will rise to the top. Designers concerned about democracy will do well to engage in the challenges of the public sector now – because the future is now.

# Project-centred democracies: Designing for democratic experimentations<sup>1</sup>

..... Ezio Manzini

**1. The crisis of democracy and its roots.** Today, the crisis of democracy is made evident by the success of democratic-authoritarian regimes in many parts of the world and, even more surprisingly, by the ethical and cultural involution underway in Europe and the United States. However, dramatic as they are, these phenomena appear to be the effect rather than the cause of the crisis, which has deep roots reaching further back in history .

In my opinion, the deepest of these roots is as follows: it has happened that, in the evolution toward ultracentralized systems, decisions are made in an increasingly opaque way and by institutions and economic actors that lack any democratic investiture to do so. As a consequence, people have the impression that democratic discussion is useless because, at the end of the day, decisions are made by others in other places. But, if there are no alternatives to choose from, there is no point in discussing and deliberating. And if, in the name of automatism in the economic systems (which are really only the shameless imposition of the interests of a privileged elite on the majority), the field of action is reduced to little or nothing, there can be no democracy. Consequently, I believe that the regeneration of democracy must start from here: from the radical affirmation that democracy must give more “power to the people.” In order to do this, it must put liberty and equality, human rights and social equity, together in a creative manner. This means tackling the crisis of democracy by promoting a great season of experimentation:

<sup>1</sup> This paper contents are presented in a more extended way in the book: Ezio Manzini, *The Politics of Everyday*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019

democratic experimentation that makes best use of the opportunities that social innovation and technology can offer. In this experimentation, design can play a big role.

**2. The need for democratic experimentations.** If people must have power, there must be questions on which they can really make decisions and arenas in which they can do so. In practice, this means that decision-making power on various questions must be given to the communities involved. However, to do this, the questions to be discussed and decided must themselves have a local dimension on which choices can have a direct impact.

In other words, it is not only a case of discussing questions on a local level that will then be decided and put into action by central organisms. Instead, production and service systems need to be developed whose local functioning depends mainly on local subsystems, endowed with autonomy and determined by choices made and carried out locally. This means shifting from the centralized hierarchical systems prevailing today to *distributed systems*: socio-technical systems consisting of a network of interconnected but relatively autonomous elements over which the local communities have the real possibility of deciding.

Robin Murray described distributed system as follows: “distributed systems handle complexity not by standardisation and simplification imposed from the centre, but by distributing complexity to the margins—to households and service users, and in the workplace to local managers and workers. Those at the margins have what those at the centre can never have—a knowledge of detail—the specificity of time, of place, of particular events, and in the consumer’s and citizen’s case, of need and desire. This is the potential. But to realise it requires new terms of engagement with users, new relations at work, new terms of employment and compensation”<sup>2</sup>.

**3. Small, local, open, connected and democratic.** For my part, on other occasions, I have talked amply about this new paradigm and the scenario deriving from it (which I have called the SLOC scenario, where SLOC stands for Small, Local, Open, Connected<sup>3</sup> and which I now, for various reasons, call the Scenario of Proximity<sup>4</sup>): a scenario in which the socio-technical systems are capable of tackling complexity because, as Murray wrote, they redistribute it to the network nodes. By doing this, it is possible for them to make best use of locally available resources and to learn by experience. Precisely because of this, distributed systems are resilient and sustainable (as opposed to centralized, hierarchical

2 Robin Murray, “Dangers and Opportunity: Crisis and the New Social Economy,” NESTA-Provocations, September 2009 (<http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/reports/>).

3 Ezio Manzini, “Small, Local, Open and Connected: Design Research Topics in the Age of Networks and Sustainability,” *Journal of Design Strategies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2010).

4 Ezio Manzini, *Livable Proximity*, Egea 2022

systems that, by their very nature, are intrinsically fragile and unsustainable). To these favorable considerations, I can now add that distributed systems are also a favorable context for democracy: by distributing activities and power to the network nodes, they make arenas possible and accessible for discussion about questions of public interest, and they do so proposing questions on a scale such that they can be debated by the communities immediately interested.

In conclusion, in returning a certain quota of power to local communities, the scenario of distributed systems is the only one that allows the crisis of democracy to be tackled at its deepest roots. Whether and how this will actually be put into practice will depend on a combination of factors. Among them, there is also the one the spread of digital technologies, new media and, in the near future, artificial intelligence.

**4. A new form of participatory democracy.** In order to contribute to this discussion a scenario is proposed, i.e. a *scenario of a project-centred democracy*. The idea is to extend the definition of democracy by considering its 'designing' dimension: democracy as a hybrid, physical and digital space, equipped to offer people an increased possibility to meet, to start conversations, to conceive and collaboratively enhance their projects. That is, a democracy that not only gives people the freedom to meet and collaboratively design their lives and their world, but that also has to be seen as a space equipped to give these conversations and codesign processes a better chance of concrete results.

In short, the *project-centred democracy* I am referring to here, is a participatory enabling ecosystem in which everybody can develop their projects and achieve their results, in so far as they do not reduce the possibility of other people doing the same. On the other hand, since we cannot design and produce alone, it is also a democracy that is born out of collaboration and produces collaboration.

In this scenario, project-centred democracy is therefore an environment that tends to give everybody the possibility of meeting and collaborating and, in so doing, to achieve objectives pursuing interests that are both individual and collective. That is, it is a scenario in which participatory democracy can flourish.

How can we create the conditions that make the existence of project-centred democracy more probable? How can we bring the groups of active citizens and the practices of representative democracy together so they support each other? How can a *democratic infrastructure* be produced for project-centred democracy?

The experience in design for social innovation permits us to answer these questions. In fact, the infrastructure of project-centred democracy corresponds to the existence of an

enabling ecosystem<sup>5</sup>: an infrastructured environment where variety of projects can emerge and thrive.

To play this role, this enabling ecosystem must include various elements as: the rules of the democratic game (which make sure that every project respects the right of the other projects to exist with equal possibility of succeeding), the physical and virtual arenas (where people can meet and decide on their aims and how to achieve them), the online services and offline support (which make the co-designing and co-production activities more accessible and effective) and the social commons (such as trust and shared values which are the precondition for all forms of collaboration). All of them, of course, have to be designed. Or better: co-designed by coalitions of designers, citizens and other social actors involved.

5 On enabling ecosystems, see Ezio Manzini, "Design, When Everybody Designs. An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation", MIT Press 2015,

# From Freedom to the Tyranny of Digital Media: Design Challenges in Today's Democracy

..... **Nuno Martins**

This essay concerns the importance of Digital Media in Communication Design thinking and its role in today's highly mediated and freedom-challenged society.

The 25th of April 1974 revolution liberated Portugal from 41 years of Estado Novo dictatorship, censorship, and political repression, implementing democratic freedom. Civil and political rights were re-established, with free, multi-party elections, and fundamental rights were enshrined.

The revolution was also key to modernising the country and opening it up to the outside world. An important step was taken in 1986 when Portugal joined the European Economic Community (EEC), now the European Union (EU), which provided opportunities for economic, social, and political development.

50 years on, Portugal is a very different country in a different, more interconnected and closer world. Portugal has established itself as a centre for technology and innovation, attracting start-ups and tech companies through favourable policies and investments in digital infrastructure.

In this more digital Portugal, access to technological devices and fast mobile internet is no longer the preserve of the elite. Digital has become highly democratised, due to the low cost of access and the evolution of devices, particularly mobile phones, which now allow citizens to solve a range of their day-to-day needs with great ease, speed, mobility and efficiency.

We have moved from a scarcity of information to an abundance, and from abundance to a growing risk of excess and even dependence. For Byung-Chul Han (2016), mobile phones promise citizens more freedom, but they can end up exerting a fatal compulsion, the compulsion to communicate. The relationship with the digital device can become obsessive and compulsive, turning freedom into coercion.

At the end of the 1990s, Ignazio Ramonet (1999) was already telling us about the tyranny of communication and how being informed without effort is an illusion. Resisting media manipulation requires commitment from citizens in order to acquire the right to participate intelligently in democratic life.

Devaluing sources of information, favouring the immediate, the exciting and the repetitive over confirmation, moderation and balance, brings us closer to the path of oppression than liberation. When citizens are immersed in ignorance, they become vulnerable to informational rubbish and a potential toxic agent for more and more rubbish. A cycle that can become dangerous when it moves through the masses and cannot be stopped by reason, but by submission. Mobs on digital networks are a case in point. They act like tsunamis with potentially devastating consequences. The waters churn with sensationalism, move in the current of hatred, gain scale on the waves of the web and devastate without law.

The dictatorship of the majority wins. The abundance of likes, shares and followers takes precedence over establishing the facts. The stimulation of emotions, hatred, reactivity and the polarisation of discourse benefit the capital of those who mediate information.

This mediation is inevitably associated with Brands, namely those of the technological giants that operate in the digital sphere, used by millions of users, such as search engines, social networks, streaming platforms and the most varied types of digital applications.

Tim Bernes-Lee, creator of the World Wide Web (WWW), wanted the WWW to be a global, networked, free, decentralised, and collaborative communication space. The neutrality of the global network dreamt by Bernes-Lee did not hold against the power capital conquered by technology brands, which dominated the network.

A power that can become worrying when democratic freedom is threatened. Abusive access to user data, and the appropriation of this information for the propagation of false and highly manipulative content, is a silent and highly lethal weapon in the intoxication of the truth of the facts and, consequently, a violation of free thought and democratic decision-making.

In mid-2015, the British consultancy Cambridge Analytica used data from 87 million Facebook users, without authorisation, to orchestrate personalised political campaigns

around the world, namely for Donald Trump's election campaign for the presidency of the United States of America in 2016, and the Brexit campaign, aimed at the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union.

As a result of these events, in 2019 Facebook was ordered to pay 5 billion dollars to the US Federal Trade Commission. And a year earlier, Cambridge Analytica was unable to withstand the scandal and filed for bankruptcy.

Yuval Noah Harari (2018) warns us of the risk of being pirated humans due to the lack of regulation. In the same vein, Tristan Harris (Orlowski, 2020) states that when the user doesn't pay for the digital product, then it's probably because they are the product. Free is therefore an illusion, because something has to be given in return to feed the power of tech brands. According to Shoshana Zuboff (Orlowski, 2020; Zuboff, 2019), for these brands to be successful in their business, they need to sell the certainty that if they place an advert, they will be successful. She adds that the success of these big predictions begins with one imperative: the need for a lot of information.

For this set of reasons, it can be said that it is no longer possible to think of design without plural thinking in conjunction with other areas of knowledge. Design is an area of interdisciplinary relations. In this relationship, the study of Digital Media is of central importance in Communication Design thinking.

Considering that digital media is led by brands, especially those of the tech giants, it is important for design to pay attention to how different types of users use, trust and depend on these brands. As such, the current global communication ecosystem demands that Communication Design involves the study of Digital Media, with the same importance as studying graphics, image, identity, motion graphics, typography or interfaces.

Digital has brought brands closer to their audiences, influencing the way they present themselves, communicate and interact. This influence also extends to the design of brands' graphic identities.

In a world of information overload, ephemerality and high competition for attention, graphic identities need to be broad, dynamic and versatile to respond consistently and efficiently to today's multimedia. To this end, the symbol and logo, the core elements of an identity, need to extend this identity unit to other elements and ways of communicating, such as imagery, animation, interactivity and sound.

The emergence of dynamic visual identities, studied by several authors (Corini, 2023; Kreutz, 2020; Martins & Raposo, 2023; Martins et al., 2021), are also a reflection of the need - or desire - for continuous recreation, renewal, readaptation, and appeal to the stimulus and more primitive emotions of the society of the spectacle in Digital Media.

However, as Álvaro Sousa (2011) warns, the more emotional designs of brands tend to risk becoming more dated or having shorter longevity horizons.

Also, the greater proximity between brands and their audiences, fuelled by the digital sphere, makes brands more open to criticism, particularly their graphic identities. Here too, reactivity, emotion, hatred and the group effect find fertile ground in digital media.

Cases of graphic identity renewal such as the Tropicana juice brand in 2009, the GAP clothing brand in 2010, or the English football club Leeds United in 2018, are just a few examples that didn't stand up to critical pressure, leading them to back down from the decision to change.

But there are also examples of the opposite, where strong criticism and pressure have not moved the determination of those responsible for the Brands, as happened with the controversial cases of the graphic Brands of the London 2012 Olympic Games, or those of Juventus Football Club and Formula 1 in 2017.

In Portugal, controversies of this kind are also occurring with greater or lesser impact.

The most recent controversy concerned the graphic identity of the Portuguese Republic, which took place in the very month of the 50th anniversary of 25 April 1974.

Chronologically speaking, in 2011, the 19th Government of Portugal, led by Pedro Passos Coelho, presented the graphic identity of the 'Government of Portugal', designed by Hélder Pombinho (Cardoso & Lopes, 2016). According to the statement issued by the Council of Ministers at the time of the decision, the aim was to '(...) identify, unify and organise the Government's visual communication' (XIX Government of the Portuguese Republic, 2011). This standardisation, which included the image of all the ministries, was also an efficiency measure, by rationalising communication media so as to '(...) achieve economies of scale, both in image development and in terms of the graphic production of the ministries' (XIX Government of the Portuguese Republic, 2011).

In 2016, the 21st government, led by António Costa, changed the name of the logo to 'Portuguese Republic', without any graphic changes or associated financial costs. The measure aimed to clarify the distinction between the State and the Government, considering the State as a whole and not just a part of it. The aim was to correct situations in which the name 'Government of Portugal' appeared, such as on medical prescriptions, public school agendas and official documents of the Portuguese state, which should not be confused with those of the government (Cardoso & Lopes, 2016).

In August 2023, the 23rd government, also led by António Costa, presented a new graphic identity, designed by Studio Eduardo Aires. The new solution divides opinion due to its graphic simplicity, particularly when it comes to discussing its effectiveness in recognising the identity, symbolic and distinctive representation of the Portuguese Republic.

But it was at the end of November that the new identity became more widely known in the media and social networks, and the discussion escalated, reaching the political class as well, especially the opposition, which is ideologically right leaning.

On 2 December, in the midst of the pre-election campaign, Luís Montenegro, the leader of the opposition, promised on his X social media account that if he became prime minister, his government would stop using the new symbol. A tweet that even today, 8 months later, is the most viewed tweet ever by Luís Montenegro.

Despite much discussion, the controversy and media attention was limited to a short period and the identity remained unchanged.

On 3 April 2024, Luís Montenegro's newly appointed government announced its first measure, the reinstatement of the previous symbol of the Republic (XXIV Government of the Portuguese Republic, 2023). It was then that the perfect storm for controversy and polarised discourse was created.

A number of factors contributed to this: it was the government's first measure, generating criticism of a supposed reversal of priorities; the change was a step backwards, rather than a new solution that had been properly considered, with the aggravating factor that the abandoned solution lasted less than a year; and it took place in the exact month of the 50th anniversary of 25 April, Freedom Day, adding a strong symbolic charge to the change.

The symbol ends up acquiring new dimensions and meanings, with the discussion already going far beyond the graphic issue. Polarisation gains even more strength. It is fuelled by the inflammatory digital networks. The depth of thought, discussion and moderation that the issue deserves is also defeated in this case by the populism of the reactive, the extremist and the trivial.

What we discussed didn't centre on the quality of the symbol. We've argued that the problem we've seen precedes that discussion. Regardless of the symbol solution in place, the problem does not lie in changing the symbol. Each government is free to do so. But when that freedom is in the current of such media-emotional tsunamis, we are not dealing with freedom, but with giving in - knowingly or unknowingly - to the tyranny of spectacle. And we're not just referring to political power, but to citizens, who navigate this current, which is contrary to free and considered thought and which is taking knowledge backwards.

In short, trying to understand these dynamics of technology and the Digital Media means recognising their strong influence on everyday life and on different areas of knowledge, particularly Design. Knowledge and education in Digital Media are therefore fundamental for a more fruitful relationship with the technology of the information world.

Working with technology rather than working for technology can be the subtle difference between relating to Digital Media in freedom or tyranny.

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# Making a Way Out of No Way: The Story of Walltown

..... **Marcia McNally**

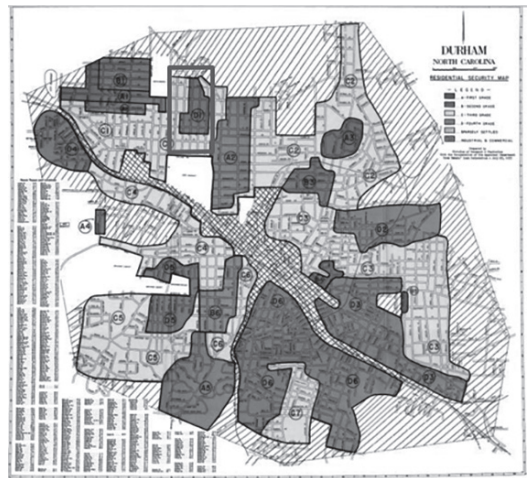
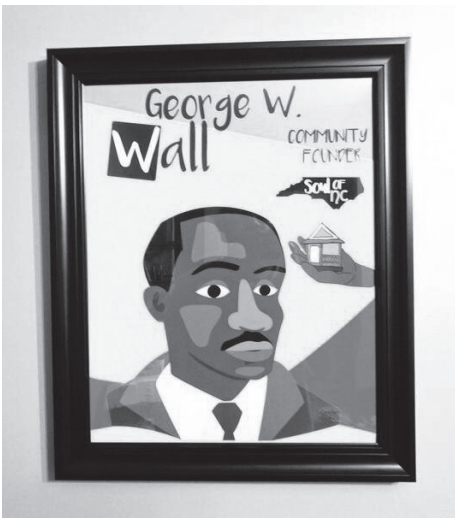
In celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution I write to reflect on the power of design to inculcate an ethos of democracy in society, and vice versa. My experience comes from a career teaching and practicing community design in Japan, Taiwan, and California. Each of the three locales approach participatory efforts differently. In Japan, machizukuri is process-driven, focused primarily on giving agency to the voice of each participant, a prerequisite to changing the hard lines of the historically hierarchical society. In Taiwan on the other hand, the efficacy of community design parallels the recent emergence of democratic decision-making (the Taiwanese elected its first president only 29 years ago). Led by designers, participation is messy, often in support of marginalized groups and pointed towards cultural preservation and built results. The California experience is as diverse as its residents (almost 40 million). Income and ethnicity are hugely influential as are a city's history and politics, which are often racially defined.

In 2010 I retired to Durham, North Carolina. I became a volunteer advocate to create affordable housing to my new hometown. Our city has become one of the hottest real estate markets, bringing with it gentrification. This essay drills down on a growing movement within the community to carve out a new Durham way where neighborhoods, notably ones of color and low-income, can hang on to its stake in the city and fight displacement on their own terms. It is about a personal collaboration with Walltown, an historically-Black neighborhood with a history of strong leadership, and its efforts to create a self-determined alternative for redevelopment of a 50-acre shopping center in its midst. Not just an alternative with community input, rather through a process of the neighborhood's own making.

## **The Past**

Walltown has existed for more than a century in a post-Civil War Southern city. The neighborhood was named for George Wall, a previously enslaved man who moved to Durham in the 1890s to work at Duke University which he did for the rest of his life. Wall bought two lots from the West End Land Company and built a shotgun house. Even though Wall was able to purchase land and build a home, Durham was a segregated city. Were we

able to ask residents in 1937, though, it is not clear if they would have defined themselves that way. Neighborhood elders who grew up there in the 40s and 50s recall it being a Shangri-la. “We were so tightly knitted no one went by their last name. It was Ms. Susie this and Mr. John that. We had everything we needed,” recollected one resident<sup>1</sup>. Another added, “We were considered poor but we didn’t know it because we had so much love and togetherness.”



Print of George Wall by North Carolina artist Garry Atkinson<sup>2</sup>. In the early twentieth century the federal agency Home Owners’ Loan Corporation created “Residential Security” maps which identified high risk neighborhoods (shown in red, including Walltown in blue box), often resulting in them being denied them access to capital investment<sup>3</sup>

Until the 1970s, when the neighborhood began to decline. Old-timers died, the younger generation sold or rented their family homes such that by 1990, 73% of the houses were renter-occupied. One quarter of the residents were living in poverty. Things have changed considerably over the past 35 years, however. No longer a northern outpost, downtown gentrification is at Walltown’s doorstep. The current value of Mr. Wall’s old home is one quarter of the new one across the street.

1 [https://www.durhamcommunityengagement.org/walltown\\_history](https://www.durhamcommunityengagement.org/walltown_history)

2 <https://texplora.co/shop?category=Art%20Prints>.

3 <https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ncmaps/id/9591>.



The stereoscopic pairs of gentrification: Mr. Wall's house and its across-the-street neighbor.

### **Northgate Mall and Northwood Ravin**

When George Wall built his home, he built it in an area of the city which was largely forested and agricultural. It remained that way until the late 1950s, when a freeway bypass was built, which in turn stimulated further development. The centerpiece was Northgate Mall; initially trendy with upscale retailers, Northgate didn't weather the fickleness of retail very well. The last time it changed hands was in 2018, and by 2020 all but a few shops were shuttered. Since then, the current owners, Northwood Ravin (NR), have floated two different redevelopment plans – one for exclusive mixed-use (retail, office, and housing), the other for “wet lab” (bio tech R&D) space. These proposals catapulted Walltown into action.



Northgate site pre-construction, 1959<sup>4</sup>. Northgate after the mall closed, 2020.

I have participated directly in Northgate redevelopment discussions in two roles – one as an affordable housing advocate, the other as a community designer. In the first I was part of a small group that approached NR about the possibility of building affordable housing on the site. This early foray was unsuccessful. The developer made it clear that there would be no affordable housing and that they were not open to partnering with or selling a portion of the property to an affordable housing developer, or to pursuing a density bonus in exchange for building affordable units.

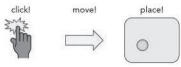
4 <http://www.opendurham.org/buildings/northgate-mall>.

Acting as a member of a small group of volunteer community designers working for the neighborhood has yielded considerably more success. In 2018 the neighborhood got to work on their own plans as soon as news broke of Northgate's sale. The leaders initiated an open-ended process with iterative rounds of fact gathering, goal setting, preparing site plan alternatives, and gathering input at each step. They have engaged all players continuously, reached out for technical assistance, and kept city officials informed. It has paid off.

First they worked with Duke Law School's Community Enterprise Clinic to conduct a survey and set neighborhood goals. They engaged DataWorks NC to identify and map key indicators of how Walltown is changing. They expanded their base to include six nearby neighborhoods likely to experience the impact of redevelopment, forming the Northgate Mall Neighborhood Council (NMNC). Weeks after the City of Durham issued its COVID "stay-at-home" order, our design team approached neighborhood leaders about partnering. It was during this meeting that I made the observation that while the community's vision was impressive, they would be well-served to figure out how to "spatialize" it before they tried to negotiate with NR. None of us had the slightest idea how to do it during a pandemic.

WHAT ARE YOUR TOP PRIORITIES?  
INSTRUCTIONS:  
Click and Move each circle into the appropriate zone.

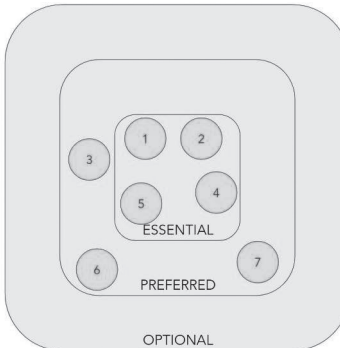
click!    move!    place!



KEY

1. Affordable housing
2. Affordable retail
3. Affordable grocery
4. Environmental sustainability
5. Community gathering and community spaces
6. Transportation hub and park-and-ride
7. Pedestrian safety and accessibility

SOURCE: Neighborhood Council Goals



Page from on-line design charrette game for prioritizing goals.

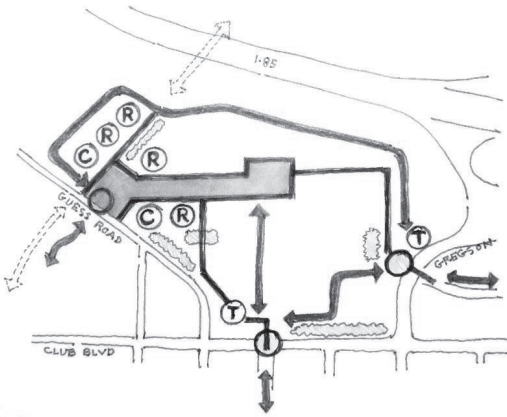
What resulted was a Zoom charrette with the NMNC. We developed an on-line design game that NMNC could play to clarify their priorities and then, using to-scale building blocks, locate them on the Northgate site to create goals-based site plan alternatives. We obtained NR's bubble diagram for Phase 1 and translated it into building blocks for comparison. Then we held two Zoom charrette meetings to discuss all of the options.





Community event held at Walltown Park during COVID.

think spatially about affordable housing. While it is their number one goal, there was no strong sense of where best to put it or how to arrange it to make a great place to live.



NMNC spatial priorities 2020.

As the redevelopment process continued, the design team created a vocabulary for spatial qualities to ensure the mall site felt inclusive regardless of race or class, that would deal with scale and density judiciously, and that would “say hello” to the architecture of the surrounding neighborhoods. As a first step we synthesized the ideas of the three alternatives into a set of design principles that neighborhood leaders could use in discussions with NR. But negotiations got nowhere. The developers put forward an entirely new proposal that focused on wet lab development. The neighborhood responded with a more specific plan for 240 units of housing in three phases (140 affordable), a grocery store, and small-scale retail for local vendors. This, too, has fallen on deaf ears with the developer.

**Walltown's Alternative Design for Northgate Mall**

*"True community is based upon equality, mutuality, and reciprocity."  
-Paul Murray*

In 2018, the Walltown Community Association started the process of building our community's vision for the future of Northgate Mall. We engaged more than 600 residents across Durham and developed a plan based on their top priorities: affordable housing and retail, community green space, and environmental sustainability. Our vision is expansive and there is precedent in our city for this kind of proposal. Let's leverage our collective power to make it happen.

Our plan includes:

- 240 Housing Units (140 of them affordable)
- Ground floor retail, prioritizing current & local businesses
- Library branch with Walltown History Hub
- Public greenspace connecting to Walltown Park
- 100-seat outdoor community amphitheater
- Community gardens instead of asphalt

Purple area (currently parking lot and retail) is the site of proposed housing, retail, and amenities. Our request is for 11 of the 50+ acres Northwood owns on the property.

Our vision, with housing and retail in yellow and the library in orange next to amphitheater.

See back for phased plan →

**Phase 1:** 80 affordable housing units and amenities  
100 apartments with monthly rents ~\$1,440+  
40 apartments with monthly rents ~\$725+

**Phase 2:** 80-unit building: 30 affordable, 50 market rate; retail  
Retail spaces for 2 large tenants like a grocery store or gym

**Phase 3:** 80-unit building: 30 affordable, 50 market rate; retail  
Several smaller retail spaces, priority to existing retail  
Existing retail remains open during phase 1-2 construction

Q: How can this plan be accomplished?  
A: 1. In exchange for approving the developer's rezoning request (needed for research & development labels), the City could acquire the land, along with a financial contribution, in a development agreement.  
2. The City could then contract with an affordable housing developer to execute the 3 phases.  
3. The project could be financed by a combination of government funds (ie: ARPA) and other stakeholder investments.

Q: How can I stay engaged and/or help with this effort?  
A: Go to [Walltown.org/contact-us](https://walltown.org/contact-us) or scan the QR code to sign up for the WCA's Northgate Mall Redevelopment Listserv.

\*Approximate monthly rents based on families of 4 earning 60% and 30% of the 2022 Area Median Income (\$35,000)

Walltown Community Association downloaded 4/2/25.

### Small Area Plan

But the neighborhood didn't give up. Throughout the community leaders kept local officials in the loop. After one presentation the Durham city council was very complimentary – "you've done all the heavy lifting needed to show how redevelopment can be community-centered," "what you have done is astonishing." Why the high praise? In addition to the fact that their process is amazing, they were working their way through it during a time when all of Durham was wrestling with how all residents could take part in the city's new prosperity, attending to the issues of wealth-building, racial equity, reparations. These values shape the city's newly adopted comprehensive plan.

As a first step in plan implementation, in 2024 City staff reached out to Walltown to co-generate a "small area plan". The process has resulted in an advisory document that will guide neighborhood improvements but also the City as it negotiates with NR on Northgate Mall. Grounded in comp plan principles, it calls for the mall site to be designed as a "15-minutes community" where residents can access their daily needs by foot, bike, or transit. The land uses include a minimum of 160 affordable housing units, a grocery store, community spaces, and connections to Walltown Park. City staff was successful in getting neighbors to think about key neighborhood patterns, such as the street grid, to carry over to the site. Equitable development and public space language is used throughout the plan.

### By One Measure

This is one chapter in a long history of a modest, unremarkable-looking Black neighborhood in the American South. Yet when I think about Walltown making its way out of no way, it seems singular<sup>5</sup>. The neighborhood is named after a once-enslaved man. It has weathered the insidious effects of redlining, industrial pollution, and divestment. Whether it will survive the siege of gentrification are stories yet written.

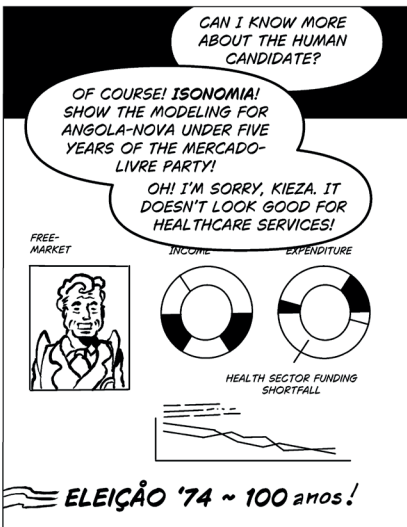
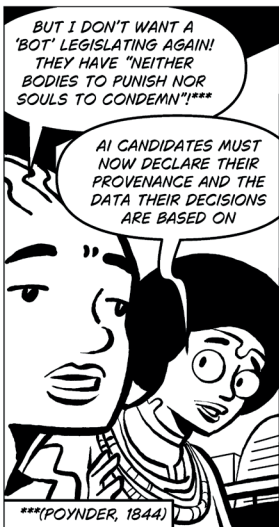
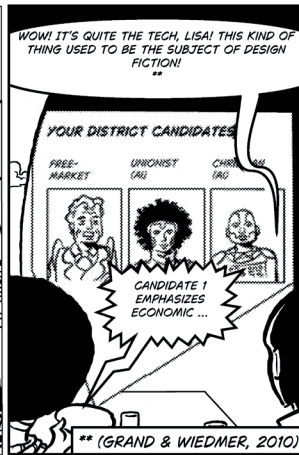
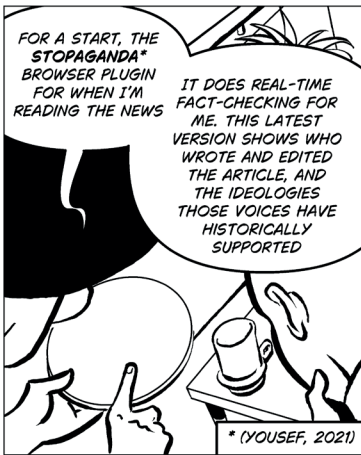
5 <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/making-way-out-no-way#:~:text=Taking%20its%20inspiration%20from%20a,out%20of%20%E2%80%9Cno%20way.%E2%80%9D>.

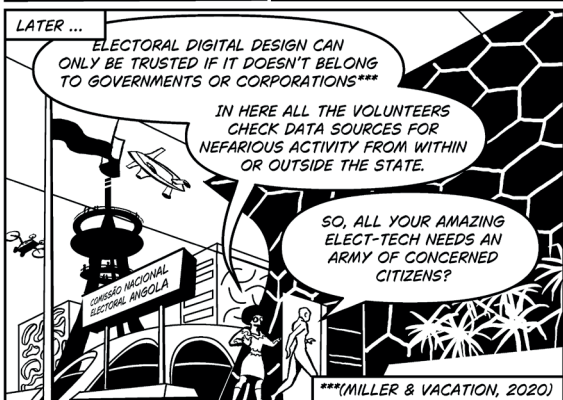
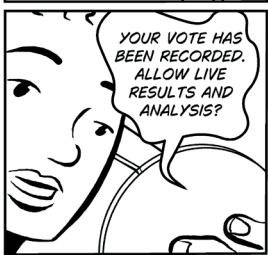
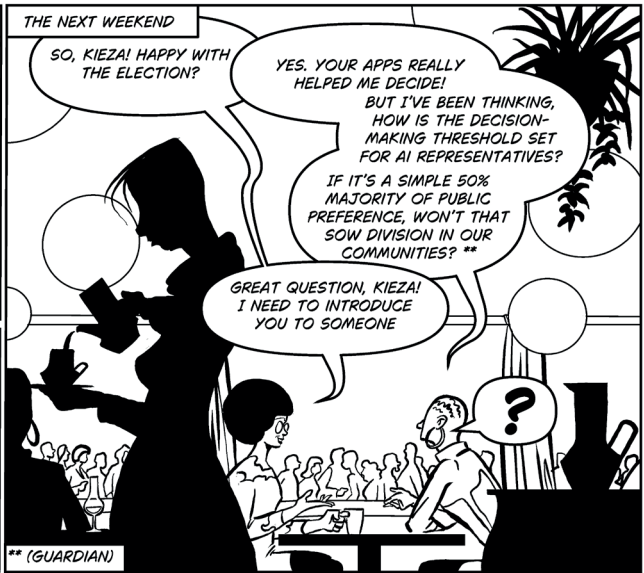
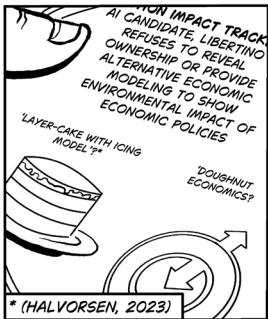
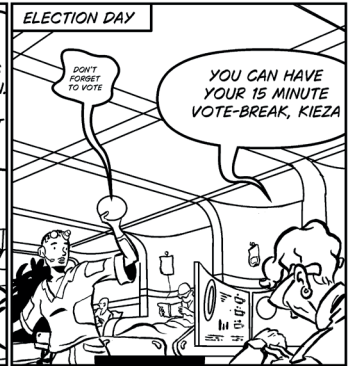
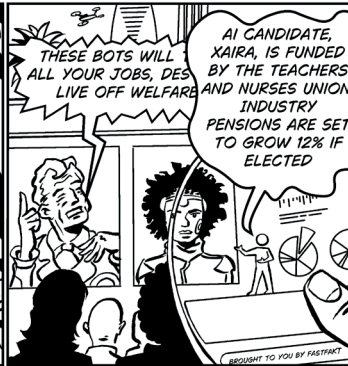
In 2017 five colleagues and I published an edited collection of over 50 participatory design techniques under the banner of *Design as Democracy*<sup>6</sup>. The book's introduction laid out conditions which are useful to measure the degree to which the Walltown experience has been democratic: that it is transactive, transformative, and tenacious. There is no question that the neighborhood association is tenacious, going back many decades. Regardless of the challenge, whether it be systemic racism or fighting the pressures of local gentrification and the influx of global investment capital. Community leaders have systematically and iteratively created forums for transactive discussion, even with the developer. While seemingly immune to the community's plans, the time will come when the developer will formally engage with the City in a process, and with an alternative plan in place, coupled with the Small Area Plan, Walltown will be ready. This leaves the question of whether this process has been transformative. To date, no new development has replaced the empty mall. However, transformation of community goals, from words to site plans to City documents, has been a tremendous advancement. In the words of one leader, "To begin with words and end up with images was a gift. The spatializing has been critical to weighing different options, especially when Northwood has given us so little in terms of housing and greenspace. It has been super helpful to move people forward. It renews our energy."

# Election Day 2074

..... Stuart Medley

Election Day 2074  
Stuart Medley





ELECTION EVE

ELECTION DAY

AI CANDIDATE, THESE BOTS WILL TAKE ALL YOUR JOBS, DESERVE TO LIVE OFF WELFARE

AI CANDIDATE, XAIRA, IS FUNDED BY THE TEACHERS AND NURSES UNION. INDUSTRY PENSIONS ARE SET TO GROW 12% IF ELECTED

DON'T FORGET TO VOTE

YOU CAN HAVE YOUR 15 MINUTE VOTE-BREAK, KIEZA

AI CANDIDATE LIBERTINO REFUSES TO REVEAL ALTERNATIVE OR PROVIDE MODELING TO SHOW ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF ECONOMIC POLICIES

"LAYER-CAKE WITH ICING MODEL"

"DOUGHNUT ECONOMICS"

\*(HALVORSEN, 2023)

THE NEXT WEEKEND

SO, KIEZA! HAPPY WITH THE ELECTION?

YES. YOUR APPS REALLY HELPED ME DECIDE!

BUT I'VE BEEN THINKING, HOW IS THE DECISION-MAKING THRESHOLD SET FOR AI REPRESENTATIVES?

IF IT'S A SIMPLE 50% MAJORITY OF PUBLIC PREFERENCE, WON'T THAT SOW DIVISION IN OUR COMMUNITIES? \*\*

GREAT QUESTION, KIEZA! I NEED TO INTRODUCE YOU TO SOMEONE

YOUR VOTE HAS BEEN RECORDED. ALLOW LIVE RESULTS AND ANALYSIS?

\*\* (GUARDIAN)

LATER ...

ELECTORAL DIGITAL DESIGN CAN ONLY BE TRUSTED IF IT DOESN'T BELONG TO GOVERNMENTS OR CORPORATIONS\*\*\*

IN HERE ALL THE VOLUNTEERS CHECK DATA SOURCES FOR NEFARIOUS ACTIVITY FROM WITHIN OR OUTSIDE THE STATE.

SO, ALL YOUR AMAZING ELECT-TECH NEEDS AN ARMY OF CONCERNED CITIZENS?

\*\*\*(MILLER & VACATION, 2020)

OF COURSE! YOU KNOW "THE PRICE OF DEMOCRACY ..."

... HAS ALWAYS BEEN ETERNAL VIGILANCE\*\*\*\*

WHERE DO I SIGN UP?!

\*\*\*\*(TOWNSEND-CROSS & GATWIRI, 2024)

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# Contributions to Design Challenges in Portugal

..... **Fernando Moreira da Silva**

According to Guy Bonsiepe, in an article published in the *Design Issues Journal* in 2006, under the thematic *design and democracy*, 'The search for a balance between the instrumental/operational aspects of technical objects and their semantic aspects constitutes the core of the designer's work, without privileging one or the other domain. (...) The relation between democracy and design, is the relation between critical humanism and operational humanism. This issue leads to the question of the role of technology and industrialization as a procedure for democratizing the consumption of goods and services, and finally to the ambivalent role of aesthetics as the domain of freedom and manipulation'.

Between the establishment of design as an autonomous professional activity and the process of evolution of design thinking, creating new knowledge and the design science, considering social, economic and aesthetic influences, there was a long journey, not only in Portugal. Design is a complex area that requires planning to successfully meet the necessary requirements, being this complexity proportional to the challenge in innovation and development, what allows design to acquire new meanings.

Although I consider myself privileged to have been able to experience the construction of thought, knowledge, and in some cases even science in design, from 1975 to the present day, in the role of active participant or promoter of actions, the truth is that I regret not being able to have the temporal distance and critical vision that would be desirable in the present situation to produce a testimony of unique moments, especially in terms of teaching and research in design, and the relationship between design and democracy, in Portugal. However, as the Spanish poet Antonio Machado wrote, 'the path is made by walking', and that is what I have been doing since the early 90s of the last century, contributing to a more social, responsible, ethical and inclusive design perspective.

If in the sixties, people began to talk about design in Portugal, relating it to a professional activity that, although with ill-defined boundaries, was identified with industrially manufactured objects and the so-called graphic arts, the truth is that from the eighties, the word design became popular in Portugal. This popularization, however, did not mean a better understanding of the designer's activity, nor did it lead to a greater deepening of the design concept, even due to the increasing number of professionals graduating from different courses in the country. However, it is also clear that at that same time design became an embryonic driver of true social and economic transformation in Portugal.

Daciano da Costa, Eduardo Afonso Dias, Jorge Pacheco, José Brandão and Salette Aranda Brandão, were prominent personalities who made unique contributions to the dawn of design in Portugal, in the construction of the programmatic paths of the courses from 1991 onwards at the Faculty of Architecture (FA), from the Technical University of Lisbon, with whom I had the opportunity to share remarkable moments of design thinking, in addition to being able to benefit from their important contributions and knowledge to the construction of critical mass in this area that is still emerging, articulating existing practice, with a design methodology and theoretical thinking that did not exist before. The visionary Daciano da Costa is responsible for preparing the Study Plan and the programs for the main courses of the undergraduate degree in Design at the FA, also assuming its pedagogical coordination.

At the same time, I was forced to choose to go abroad to continue my studies, due to the fact of not having in Portugal supervision for the theme I wanted to address: Colour. And it was exactly during this enriching journey in Manchester, UK, that I came face to face in a deeper way with some concepts that were new to me, such as Universal Design, Design for All, Accessibility, User-centred Design or Inclusive Design, having had the opportunity to develop several practical research projects with aging population or people with disabilities. At the same time, at the FA design training, Jorge Pacheco, assisted by António Cordeiro, pioneered the approach of these topics in Portugal during the fifth year of undergraduation studies in design, collaborating with the *Portuguese Design Centre - CPD*, and the industry, strengthening relations between teaching and companies.

Given the non-existence of a 2nd Cycle in Design in Portugal, once again under the leadership of Daciano da Costa, in 2001 the FA created the first *MSc degree* in Design in our country, having had the opportunity to collaborate with him in this creation process, along with Martins Barata, Eduardo Afonso Dias, José Brandão and João Paulo Martins. It was a very important milestone for the consolidation of teaching and research in design in Portugal. Among the several collaborations we had in this degree, I must highlight the importance of the contribution of the designers Carlos Rocha and Jorge Alves, relevant personalities of our national design.

In 2003, collaborations with CPD within the scope of the European *EQUAL Program*, focused on the thematic of *Inclusive Design*, allowed a greater rapprochement between different national entities and personalities, contact with international experts and the blossoming of the use of concepts such as trans and interdisciplinarity. This initiative with European funding, coordinated globally by CPD, then chaired by designer Henrique Cayate, allowed me to coordinate for the FA the multiple implemented actions, as well as playing the role of coordinator of the *National Observatory of Inclusive Design*, which was based at the FA.

This intense partnership work, also with municipalities and other faculties of the Technical University of Lisbon, led me to create the first *PhD degree in Design* in Portugal in 2005, starting it in 2006/2007. Once again, and with the participation of several colleagues, destiny allowed me to be the 'main actor' in a step that decidedly contributed to the consolidation of the critical mass in design, in Portugal, even allowing the implementation of practical investigations such as *Research by Design* or *Research through Design*, alongside with theoretical or theoretical-practical investigations, at PhD level.

With the beginning of the 21st century, a new phase in the history of design in Portugal begins, interconnecting teaching, research and society in general, both at the level of companies and industry, as well as at the level of collaboration with local government and communities, with an increasingly consistent transfer of the focus on authorial design to social design. Research centres articulated with academia in general, throughout the first quarter of this century, have made a relevant contribution to consolidating fundamental concepts and consciously accept the new challenges designers are facing, within the scope of a more assertive and democratic practice, being design linked to concepts such as innovation and knowledge, in order to improve the benefits that it provides to society.

If Maldonado himself defended that education should be given in small communities of an informal nature, operating in the same way as traditional workshops: places of training and artistic-craft production under the guidance of 'masters', today with the profound paradigmatic changes that we are facing, we must articulate teaching and research in design, valuing the 'spirit of the place', with the challenges posed to us by the new generations, by the incorporation of new technologies, methods and tools in industry, the articulation between robots and Human Beings, and the new roles of the designers, valuing ethics and social responsibility, together with resilience, new business models and society in general.

Design can perform a human-centred problem-solving approach contributing with solutions to social, economic, environmental, or business problems and uncover high opportunity areas, being itself a potential process for design scaling to different sectors, especially when working in a cross-functional team. As design is an instrument of self-expression and critique of political power, affecting all social contexts, it is possible to explore possible new democratic paradigms through a design perspective, since design and democratic practices can intersect and even overlap. We cannot presume that government, industry, academia or designers should determine the different outcomes, without recognizing that the communities and local organizations are also creative and resourceful. Responsible design must perform as a facilitator and a contributor to a more diverse civic imagination, inspiring long-term stewardship.

In Portugal, after 50 years of democracy we should be aware that it requires constant renewal and care, and designers are able to contribute to local democracy by drawing together theory and practice, making (how to do) and reflection (how to think). This type of collaborations is hands-on democracy in action, helping enliven neighbourhoods and promoting cultural understanding, addressing current and future design paradigmatic challenges.



# An Argument of Your Choice

..... **Marco Neves**

A consistent trend has emerged in which external factors increasingly shape the design process. Participatory practices now frequently dominate, with expanded collaboration and shared creativity becoming the norm; designers are urged to accumulate precise, objective information to ground their work; and it has become widely acceptable to adopt existing suggestions, ideas, materials, and anything else already registered and presented somewhere, not so much as an alternative, but as an appropriate choice, in an automatic and 'intelligent' way.

This convergence of factors appears to be stripping designers of their central, distinctive role in defining what we call 'design.' Today, the singularity being lost is not that of the work of art, as Walter Benjamin observed, but that of the creative subject himself. Freedom of artistic expression has always been difficult, achieved through determination in various places and at different moments of historical upheaval. From this freedom obtained by the individual, designers have played a crucial role in shaping social narratives and cultural identities, which reflects their contribution to democratic societies.

However, the installed belief that others (humans and non-humans) can assist or replace designers through willingness, pragmatism, benevolence, or simple ignorance is modifying what design is, what it can be, and its potential impact. The constant sharing of responsibility for design projects, the replacement of decision-making, or the advent of artificial intelligence tools and prefabricated solutions threatens this freedom. The intense presence of non-experts, reliance on unquestionable information, and the adoption of recent technologies, often marketed as liberating, obscure the range of choices and impose restrictions that are not always apparent.

Freedom, a cherished value in our democracy, is paradoxically neglected, precisely because we take it for granted and do not notice its erosion. This is concerning in design, where the very essence of creativity lies in the ability to think, create, and express freely.

In 'Fear of Glass,' when describing Mies van der Rohe's modern vision, Josep Quetglas directly and succinctly explains what he considers to be the essence of an architectural project. 'Project,' Quetglas clarifies, comes from the verb 'to project', meaning to send forward. While Quetglas's analysis was about the German pavilion at the International Exhibition in Barcelona in 1929, his insight applies universally. He could have been talking about any other work, in architecture or design. The reasons why we so frequently use the

term 'project' nowadays to describe our creative work have not changed substantially. The simplicity of the observation also does not diminish the ambition of its implications.

The first implication challenges many designers and students, who aim to simplify the complexity and depth of knowledge inherent to design practice, whatever their specialty. Design is an action with political identification or association. Not necessarily with political affiliation but with a link to a manifestation, in the sense that a designer projects something at odds with what is left behind. If a designer proposes something, it is because the context in which he works is insufficient. There is, therefore, a statement that comes from belief, which fuels the individual and his creative expression.

The second implication is a redundancy, which sometimes seems forgotten. Design is always made for tomorrow, for the future, near or distant. Even if to do so, the designer brings his past, inseparable from each individual. This instills responsibility for the bond about to be established, its impact, and its legacy.

These implications do not always seem easy to reconcile with the habits and procedures that surround designers and that transmit them a way of acting. The search for and consolidation of beliefs increasingly seems like an incompatible challenge with the daily efforts of most designers. The lack of these beliefs weakens the need to communicate and the desire of the creative individual to interfere with a certain state of things.

On the other hand, why should we think or imagine a future if we have just collected data about users' needs? If we have listened to the concerns of all stakeholders, who brings together the most informed and important observations and visions about a given situation? Why imagine new things, environments that change, relationships that transform, and materialities that reinvent themselves if no one asked for or expected any of this?

The concern and consideration of 'users' of products that do not yet exist drive designers to accumulate information, which, although it may be (and not always is) very suitable for a specific population group, gives them expected products and services. User-centered design instills this mindset of considering above all factors that are external to the individual who creates.

The greatest weight that knowledge and predictive rigor procedures place on the design process is that of replacement. Ideas are generated because 'users have indicated that...' or because 'users need...' and not because the designer or any other creative individual has designed a proposal or working hypothesis that does not fit with what is expected, ordered, or suggested. The notion of democratizing the design process by opening the scope to legitimate concerns and diverse participants is having as a return the reduction and possible annulment of the contribution of the individual with a differentiating vision, who is artist and scientist in equal parts, to democracy.

A designer surrounds himself today with information that is used to replace his creative actions and decisions. Research on situations, predictive data on users, and quantitative and even qualitative methods initially have an essential purpose: not so much to substantiate proposals but to free designers from the responsibility of creative decisions, especially if contrary to all previously collected data.

The lightness regarding creative decisions is accompanied by the illusion that recent technologies provoke in us. I became disenchanted a long time ago, not so much because of the long-term consequences of some technologies but rather because of the somewhat lazy permissiveness with which designers accept, adhere to, and absolve themselves of responsibility for any inclusion of technology in their daily work and creative lives and which serves as a replacement for their presence, as modifying agents of our individual and collective experience and as proponents of desirable or unexpected transformations of the times that are approaching.

To the designer, some technologies are often presented as facilitators of creativity, convenient means that guarantee efficiency and inspiration. They expand available resources, reduce working time, increase the possibilities for experimentation, and free the designer from the hardships of his process. Except, you may have noticed, none of this truly is freedom.

Technologies based on artificial intelligence, for example, rely on algorithms composed of existing data shaped by historical prejudices and a dominant aesthetic. Also, using pre-designed templates and elements severely restricts originality, directing us toward conventional options. Easy access and use of these technologies standardize essential phases of the creative process and install complacency, which is contrary to the differentiating genesis of a designer's work. Furthermore, the abundance of options generates, especially in younger professionals, an illusion of freedom of choice and decision-making without realizing that the options made for this decision condition or replace individual creativity.

This set of circumstances then appears to overwhelm designers in the absence of belief and the removal of genuine creative decision-making. As a group, it seems that we are transitioning from what was a physical and political fragility in our freedom to materially represent ideas of artists and creatives to an emotional fragility of those who now seem to suffer so as not to have to risk a representation, which becomes a manifestation of that same conquered freedom.

The tempting fascination with technology and the assertiveness of data external to oneself brought a vulnerability to designers, alienated from the demands that design activity deserves. The fewer risks and challenges designers are prepared to face, the less genuine freedom they will have as social and cultural agents. Conformity with norms and trends,

due to the supposed stability they bring, makes it impossible to disturb the state of things, reimagine them, and follow what a 'project' is, in Quetglas's description. Designers do not need to go back to being modernists and self-centered. But they cannot, on the other hand, do without their vision and freedom to express it.

A memorable and also trivialized achievement is freedom. We have become so used to this freedom that today, we seem to be giving it away without really understanding it. Freedom of creation, as manifested in design action, is one of our most common but also differentiating features. It is strange, therefore, that in the face of the resources with which many try to obscure us, we are easily letting our distinctive features go.

# Designing ‘Green Democracy’ in the Age of Climate Crisis

..... Eduardo Staszowski, Lara Penin, Connor Smith

## Introduction

With climate emergencies on the rise, governments are facing growing political challenges and criticism. The climate crisis emerges as an added peril to democracy, joining interlinked reactionary trends like the surge of authoritarian populism in potentially destabilizing democratic norms and institutions.<sup>1</sup> The pressing nature and transnational magnitude of the crisis may lead to a series of alarming developments and anti-democratic tendencies. Governments could centralize power to implement emergency measures while private lobbies and vested interests escape more expansive environmental regulation or accountability. Under these circumstances, democratic accountability and trust are likely to erode, as governments try to bypass standard democratic procedures in the name of swift action or to please private interests. Furthermore, international pressures and the unequal impacts of climate change on different populations are already exacerbating social inequalities, leading to disenfranchisement and social unrest. Some have gone so far as to suggest that the urgency of the crisis requires abandoning democracy altogether, proposing dictatorial or centralized structures of governance to assure the survival of the species—even at the cost of human rights and individual freedoms.<sup>2</sup>

Marking the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution, which symbolizes Portugal’s transition to democracy, this short essay examines these challenges alongside concepts such as cosmopolitics and pluriversality. We propose a search for fresh perspectives and

1 Harvard Kennedy School. 2024. “Democracy at a Crossroads: Trends, Threats, and Backsliding, Exploring Structural Solutions.” Retrieved from <https://www.sir.advancedleadership.harvard.edu/articles/democracy-crossroads-trends-threats-backsliding-exploring-structural-solutions>.

2 For more on this type of ‘ecofascism,’ see: Gorz, André. 1980. *Ecology as Politics*. Translated by Patsy Vigderman and Jonathan Cloud. Boston: South End Press.

insights about pathways towards ‘green democracy,’ where climate justice is fundamental to democratic governance and vice-versa.

Introducing a final piece to our puzzle, we focus on a dual thesis: the profound ontological impact of design on shaping our realities, and the transformative potential of participatory design practices in democratic processes. In this sense, we embrace design as a form of prefigurative politics to enact alternative forms of polity, enhancing various democratic frameworks—from electoral and liberal democracies to more participatory and pluralist models—while diminishing partisan polarization and entrenched interests.<sup>3</sup> These approaches not only cultivate a sense of shared responsibility and accountability, but also establish experimental social practices that embody a desired future society.

### **Political and Epistemological Challenges**

Central to democratic systems is the question of authority, or who holds the knowledge and power to make decisions, particularly on complex and politically charged issues like climate change. Assumptions about the essential desirability of scale and growth pervade the knowledge structures of modern global society.<sup>4</sup> Government technocrats often project and retain their authority through quantitative, economic, and bureaucratic forms of reasoning, which dominate policymaking and sideline more qualitative, contextual, and tacit forms of knowledge. This dominance is justified by the perceived objectivity of economic metrics, which can overshadow the more nuanced and lived experiences of communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis.

The challenge lies not only in the type of knowledge that is valued but also in who gets to participate in decision-making processes. Governments regularly fail to meaningfully include voices from the marginalized communities who have been disproportionately affected by climate emergencies and policies. This exclusion perpetuates a cycle where decisions lack a profound understanding of the circumstances, resulting in actions that are at best mitigatory, and at worst, ineffective or even detrimental.<sup>5</sup>

The dynamics of participation and collaboration in democratic regimes can be complex and messy. Different actors may have conflicting interests and unequal power balances, which can lead to power struggles. These power imbalances manifest in various forms, including control over resources, access to information, destabilizing tactics, and so on.

3 DiSalvo, Carl. 2016. “Design and Prefigurative Politics.” *The Journal of Design Strategies* 8 (1): 29-35.

4 Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

5 Sovacool, Benjamin K., Bruno Turnheim, Andrew Hook, Andrea Brock, and Mari Martiskainen. 2021. “Dispossessed by Decarbonisation: Reducing Vulnerability, Injustice, and Inequality in the Lived Experience of Low-Carbon Pathways.” *World Development* 137 (January): 105116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105116>.

Collaboration can also be marked by conflict, which when institutions are designed accordingly, is not necessarily 'bad' for democracy.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that democratic engagement entails the skillful channeling of these agonistic tensions rather than their suppression.<sup>7</sup> However, these tensions are always at risk of overflowing their institutional and ontological bounds and becoming antagonistic threats to democracy itself, particularly if political partnership and mutuality disintegrates into enmity.

In a democratic system, conflict can manifest in various ways. One common scenario is tension between local communities and external stakeholders, such as government agencies, corporations, and NGOs. Local, Indigenous and traditional communities often have a deep understanding of their environment and possess valuable knowledge about sustainability and equity. However, their voices are frequently marginalized in decision-making processes in which more powerful stakeholders conceptualize wellbeing in terms of economic gain and development, rather than as ecological and social wellbeing. This can even endanger the security of individuals and communities who dare to question the dominant narratives and power interests.<sup>8</sup>

In the Amazon region, for example, where significant power asymmetries are present, local and Indigenous environmental advocates often clash with powerful development interests in agriculture, mining, and logging, activities that are sometimes illegal. These disparities are pivotal in shaping conflicts over resources, which usually favors powerful groups.

Thus, the formation of coalitions and alliances that unite diverse identities and actors with shared goals becomes crucial to counter these power imbalances. Despite their relative fragility, these networks have the capacity to adapt to evolving political landscapes, international pressures, and available resources, enabling them to put pressure, shape public opinion, and advocate for policies that advance a common conception of the good.<sup>9</sup>

6 DiSalvo, Carl. 2015. *Adversarial Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

7 Mouffe, Chantal. 2000. *The Democratic Paradox*. London and New York: Verso.

8 Revkin, Andrew. 2004. *The Burning Season: The Murder of Chico Mendes and the Fight for the Amazon Rain Forest*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

9 For example, see: RETA. 2024. "Flowing into Being: Unveiling Gentle Acts of Resistance in the Brazilian Amazon." *FKW // Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und Visuelle Kultur* 75 (Special issue on "Feminist Infrastructural Critique.") Edited by Elke Krasny, Sophie Lingg, Claudia Lomoschitz. RETA, also known as the Transdisciplinary Network of the Amazon (Rede Transdisciplinar da Amazônia), emphasizes collective contribution over individual recognition, aligning with their commitment to collaborative and integrated insights. This essay exemplifies this approach by crediting the group instead of individuals. The contributors, listed in alphabetical order for equity, are Claudio Bueno, Dionéia Ferreira, Jolemia Chagas, Ligia V. Nobre, Beatrice P. Padovan, Laura Pappalardo, and Eduardo Staszowski.

### **Cosmopolitics, Pluriversality and Ontological Design**

Confronted with this intricate web of relationships, worldviews and interests, we feel compelled to explore theoretical discourses that help us understand how to assemble common conceptions of eco-social wellbeing and build the democratic agency to pursue them. Concepts such as cosmopolitics, pluriversality, and ontological design offer clues about where to start. They disrupt dominant narratives of progress and development, advocating instead for a more reflexive and conscious approach to shaping our collective future.

Starting with *cosmopolitics*, this concept urges us to explore alternative models that align more closely with ecological imperatives, promoting solidarity and regenerative practices.<sup>10</sup> It critiques the dominant narratives of linear progress and perpetual growth that support modern industrial societies, challenging the authority of modern scientific rationality and conventional political structures. The inclusion of diverse perspectives and knowledge systems is crucial, and in particular, Indigenous and traditional local knowledges. Cosmopolitics calls for democratic processes that embrace complexity and uncertainty, fostering a pluralistic and inclusive approach to imagination and decision making. It urges us to reconsider development goals, and instead prioritize ecological balance and social wellbeing over economic gain where human and non-human actors must negotiate and co-create shared worlds.

Next, the concept of *pluriversality* acknowledges and nurtures the interconnectedness of all beings and systems, alongside the coexistence of multiple worldviews and practices.<sup>11</sup> Advocates of this concept also, thus, imagine democratic systems that respect and integrate diverse ecological knowledge and socio-cultural practices. Embracing alternative knowledge systems thereby also opens a space of knowing beyond fundamental assumptions of dualism, introducing more expansive conceptions of relationality and interdependence to politics.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, the concept of *ontological design* asserts that practices of design, expert or spontaneous, fundamentally shapes human existence and reality. These extend beyond merely creating products, services, and built environments to profoundly influencing our ways of being in the world.<sup>13</sup> Recognizing design's pivotal role in shaping our reality allows

10 Stengers, Isabelle. 2010. *Cosmopolitics I*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

11 Escobar, Arturo. 2018. *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

12 Escobar, Arturo, Michal Osterweil, and Kriti Sharma. 2024. *Relationality: An Emergent Politics of Life Beyond the Human*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

13 Willis, Anne-Marie. 2006. "Ontological Designing." *Design Philosophy Papers* 4 (2): 69-92.

us to reimagine alternative governing forms that are inherently connected to ecological principles.

Participatory design practices support this reimagining by offering tools to create counter-narratives to existing modes of governance through the negotiation of differences and facilitating constructive dialogue. Rather than promising to identify rationally superior ‘solutions,’ participatory design mobilizes a type of decision-making that remains contextual, creative, and open to iteration.<sup>14</sup> By making imaginative leaps from incomplete evidence and evaluating their plausibility, this approach uncovers new possibilities and viewpoints. In this sense, it has the potential to bring to light otherwise invisible perspectives.

Taken together, these concepts indicate alternative paths for green democratic thinking—ones that bend away from assuming fixed interests, pursuing scalable or transferable ‘solutions,’ or identifying a single ontological-political space in which to operate. Design (in its wider sense) is a crucial frame: collective, reflexive, and discretionary agency that exists within and beyond institutional democracy, prefiguring a mode of decisive political action amidst pluriversality.

### **Conclusion: Experimenting with Polity Forms**

If, as we argue above, a ‘green democracy’ is about much more than pursuing incremental policy change, what does a fundamental rethinking of its institutional forms look like? While this question is far too complex to address thoroughly in a short essay, a number of thinkers have experimented with green democratic theories that reassemble institutions in provocative and generative ways. These ideas nudge our central concepts of cosmopolitics, pluriversality, and ontological design toward a more concretely thinkable set of possible polity forms.

For example, the idea of a ‘green state’ involves integrating environmental considerations into all aspects of governance.<sup>15</sup> Moving away from the neoliberal conception of the state as a guarantor of a growth-dependent economy, a green state would instead reformulate existing state institutions and imaginaries to guarantee ecological, rather than purely economic, wellbeing. This approach ensures that environmental sustainability is always prioritized, led by principles of transparency, accountability, and public participation. This requires understanding the state as a complex assemblage of practices and ideas, rather than a standard institutional form, opening it up to alter-politics and ontological design without abandoning the strategic and historical heft of the state imaginary.<sup>16</sup>

14 Saward, Michael. 2021. *Democratic Design*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

15 Eckersley, Robyn. 2004. *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

16 Mitchell, Timothy. 1991. “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics.” *The American Political Science Review* 85 (1): 77-96.

Another example is 'Florestania,' or forest citizenship, which envisions a society where natural ecosystems are active participants in social and economic frameworks.<sup>17</sup> Coined by the rubber tapper movement in Brazil in the 1980s, Florestania combines the Portuguese words "cidadania" (citizenship) and "floresta" (forest), integrating citizenship with forest rights.<sup>18</sup> It reimagines the forest as a place where all beings are citizens with rights. This model puts nature in charge, where ecosystem health directly dictates social wellbeing.

Complementing these ideas is a final example of the 'cosmopolis', which reimagines urban spaces as hubs of artificial and natural coexistence.<sup>19</sup> In this vision, cities are the starting point to address the climate crisis and play a crucial role in shaping the future of sustainable development and democratic governance. From housing to urban farms, to efficient public transportation, all systems are designed to reduce carbon emissions while participatory planning processes foster a sense of belonging and collective stewardship.

Addressing governance at different scales and situations, these three examples indicate what kind of green democratic thinking is enabled if we embrace the radical possibilities of cosmopolitical, pluriversal, and ontological design. Working through and beyond our inherited institutions, a commitment to addressing the climate crisis demands a bolder political imagination than one that cedes decision-making to a purely economic conception of wellbeing, 'scalable' solutioneering, established power configurations, or anti-democratic currents of emergency centralization. Instead, we must take seriously a much wider field of democratic politics. Design offers us an early language for this agency to fundamentally reimagine our political structures, placing stronger democratic principles at the forefront of climate action and aligning human activities with the health of our planet.

17 CIFOR-ICRAF. 2014. "Forest Citizenship in Acre, Brazil." Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR). Retrieved from <https://www.cifor-icraf.org/knowledge/publication/5093/>.

18 Schmink, Marianne. 2011. "Forest Citizens: Changing Life Conditions and Social Identities in the Land of the Rubber Tappers." *Latin American Research Review* 46 (3): 141-158.

19 Ciomasu, Ioan M., & Keith Culver. 2011. "Eco-cities in a Globalized Future – From Constantinopolis to Cosmopolis?" In *ESEE 2011: Advancing Ecological Economics: Theory and Practice*: 14-17. Istanbul, Turkey.

# What can design do? Reflections in favour of the resistance of objects.

..... **Fernando Poeiras**

The Greek Agora; the Roman coins circulating daily with the faces of the Emperors; imposing public buildings with omnipresent insignia, seals, banners, badges, medals, uniforms... in all totalitarianisms. If each policy has its own powers of the object, where is today's 'objectuality' heading? Unfortunately, this text won't answer this question, but it will try to systematise some notes resulting from a dialogue with Hannah Arendt's thought, and with some other authors of political theory, regarding the (current) politics of objects.

Today, product design has found a place within the production system that is different from the one it occupied in the Industrial system of the early 20th century, or in the 50s to 70s of the same century, allying itself and sometimes rivalling other actors in the production of objects - craftsmen, engineers, artists, etc. - and also collaborating with social, cultural and political actors. Technology has changed, the economy has changed, production, distribution and consumption systems have changed, and with them the place and function of design. In many design schools, this new place has been sought explicitly through the training of a designer, understood as a material and social strategist, equipped with critical discourses (often from the humanities and social sciences). So, with the question about the politics of objects in the field of design, it is inevitable that another one arises: in a democracy - and in favour of organising a more plural, freer and fairer society - what, and how, can we design?

A critical discourse must also include a critical watch on the (human) will to power of individuals and sometimes also of professional classes and other groups. Designers are no exception. There are experiences that deserve our attention, such as Bruce Mau's collaboration with a soft tyranny in Qatar to develop an (impossible, but consequential in reality) 'total design' project. Without analysing it here, but drawing some lessons from this collaboration, we can rephrase the previous question: without (utopian) illusions or conformism (and moderating the all too human will to power), what can objects be to improve the current 'order of things'?

The phrase 'order of things' evokes the need for 'tangibles' and 'modes of organisation' that allow people to recognise and orientate themselves in any situation and deal with it. Let's try to identify some aspects of objects that contribute to the order of things; or, to put it more strictly, let's try to identify some powers of objects, which are variable, as well as their political powers.

The political critique of objects can consider four aspects of the power of objects: 1) objects as social mediators, including power relations; 2) objects as furnishings of instituted scenarios, including formal politics; 3) objects as builders of a world (a phenomenon that goes beyond cultural approaches to the object); 4) objects as part of ethologies, in von Uexküll's sense, understood as complex artifices of adaptation to an 'environment' (but which, if they are 'maladapted', can threaten survival on and of the Earth).

The first line of enquiry, the approach to the object as a social mediator, has been fuelled above all by interpretations of Michel Foucault's studies. These approaches look for forms of domination and resistance that, as well as being omnipresent, are insidiously 'informal' (i.e. they design power relations understood as sustaining formal and instituted relations, but also their transformation); and they tend to consider all human artifice, including objects, from the angle of (social and cultural) constructivism. The female pill or the Gutenberg press, in different ways, are objects that have participated in changing power relations. Even though they have weights that are difficult to weigh up in the alteration of a historical circumstance - which also includes a certain and not insignificant political-institutional framework - they illustrate this point of view.

To avoid reducing the object to the status of a human mediator, both in its critical analyses and within project thinking, one of the strongest arguments is Arendt's recovery of the concept of 'reification' in *The Human Condition*, critically reviewing Karl Marx's analyses of the object, present as early as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Arendt's critique does not take man as its point of support, but rather the defence and care of a world in which the object has, as she writes, the function of 'reifying and turning into an "objective", tangible worldly presence'. This status of tangible presence, being inseparable from the attributes of stability, durability, and ordering power, is not generalisable to everything we consider objects - for example, it is not generalisable to disposable and consumable items - nor does it exist to the same degree in all objects - for example, in a newspaper, in a best-seller, in a 200-year-old paper engraving or in a 2,000-year-old literary work. But from this worldly and cultural hierarchy of the degree and type of tangibility, one cannot conclude its desirability (absolute) or inherent quality (absolute); however, only this tangibility can give some guarantee that we can 'be at ease' in this world, obtaining from it some protection against the fragility and fickleness typical of human relationships, including political relationships, as Arendt argued. In Portugal, until recently, buying jewellery after the wedding was a visible symbol of the success of the alliance and a sensible protection against possible socio-economic instability.

Let's consider the other two powers of objects in their power to reify, stabilise, endure, and organise politically and mundanely. The images chosen, of 'furniture' and 'building', provide us with a pre-understanding - limited in time and space - of the mobile tangibility, which leaves more free space for action, present in furniture, which is distinct from walls, i.e. the immobile tangibility of building, and the consequent greater limitation to action

in front of walls. The images chosen guide us to recognise different freedoms and also tangibly different constraints; i.e. to distinguish between immovable conditions and other conditions that are alterable to different degrees. Freedom and political action between men changed tangibly with the emergence of parliaments, but the game of war changed radically with the possibility of exterminating life through the atomic bomb (Arendt). In the first case, if we want to differentiate conditions, there is a change in the setting and with it our roles, in the other case it is the very function of shelter of the building that is disrupted and with it the conditions of life. Analyses of these different politics of objects - of their different tangibles and powers: organising, stabilising, enduring - go beyond the relationships between people mediated by objects or the more general 'objectification' of man in objects, as Marx proposed.

Any political regime has specific objects and specific attributes of the objects that jointly distribute the political-institutional powers of the objects in that regime or transform it. Let's recall a few examples: an inflatable parliament (in Peter Sloterdijk's ironic image) will not be a parliament, a portrait without majesty will not be an effective royal portrait (as Madame Campan insightfully wrote in her Memoirs), and a building can exercise empathy and micro-organise the reconciliation of a nation (as Martha Nussbaum has shown). In short: the object attributes that generate stability, durability, organisation, and tangibility are as variable as the objects themselves.

Although some of these attributes depend on more constant conditions throughout the history of objects in the West, such as so-called noble materials or the exquisite execution of an object, there are several exceptions. For example, the arrowheads of some nomadic tribes were 'jewellery' to be lost in combat, but war scenes have always used the expenditure and aesthetics of force - the sensory and emotional effect of the flight of these arrows was remarkable - as exuberant displays of warlike power.

A republican institutional politics requires a certain order of things, a furnishing of its scene. Firstly, it requires public things - to be cared for and inhabited by everyone - occupied by public people, citizens - i.e. relatively impersonalised people, through objects, who momentarily adhere to a non-gregarious collective place and role - also occupied by other public things ordered by criteria, always disputable, of judgement about their importance, their value and their quality - what will be better, worse or exceptional - also ordered by rules, which include a set of explicit rights, for example about the ownership of objects. Perhaps the current moment is one of a certain erosion of the republican 'order of things', through the affective economy and its rhetoric of 'value for me', through the impoverishment of many objects that have become non-durable and worthless, others that have become obsolete, through the desire to be identified and not represented in objects, etc.

If you don't change people, you change the organisations between people (as Arendt said), what order of things do we need today to tangibly have more responsible freedom, more justice and equality?



# Modernist Amazons and Design. Recalling Eileen Gray, Lilly Reich and Aino Marsio-Aalto

..... **Fátima Pombo**

This text is a response to the kind invitation of the editors of the book *Design and Democracy*, who challenged me to participate with a short essay to this significant endeavour. I hope my decision to write about these three iconic female designers, that moved forward the expansion of democracy in Design, contributes to the joint venture of reflecting together about their legacy of no complacency with the role that the *Zeitgeist* was reserving and expecting from them.

The observations about Eileen Gray and Aino Marsio-Aalto are based upon individual archive research, shared with the co-authors with whom I published about them, namely Anna Marie Fisker and Pauliina Rumbin, and the in-site visits of the house E-1027 in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France and Villa Mairea in Normarkku, Finland, besides the inspiring talks with Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, one of the recognized academics who have been researching and writing about Aino Marsio-Aalto. The case of Lilly Reich relies mainly on secondary literature. However, it is new for me to bring these creators together, with formal or informal training in Design, Architecture and Art, who definitely helped to empower women as designers and therefore to shape design as a more democratic and gender free discipline. Plus, the present text is coined as a dissemination work and this is with that goal in mind, that I am building up the core statement of the narrative: the acknowledgement of the pioneer achievements of female designers has gone a long road and has overcome many barriers. It seems that a fair and crystal-clear recognition is still in process.

There are many women who expressed the uniqueness of their talent and work, and if some are getting the deserved appreciation and respect, others still wait for the fair place that history owes to them.

Eileen Gray (Enniscorthy, 1878-Paris, 1976), Lilly Reich (Berlin, 1885-Berlin, 1947) and Aino Marsio-Aalto (Helsinki, 1894-Helsinki, 1949) were born and lived in different contexts, but there are many features that make them equally courageous and legendary. They contributed with their genius, independence, commitment and audacity to build up the

avantgarde of a still in construction wishful understanding of design without the prerogative of gender authority.

### **Success in lifetime with adversity**

Eileen Gray was aware of the most recent innovations in architecture and visual arts of her time but engaged herself in designing a cutting-edge option regarding the standards of modern architecture. 'It is a fact that in the house E-1027, she used the most recent innovations of modern architecture, incorporating elements from Loos' anti-ornamentalism, the Bauhaus functionalism, and most obviously, Le Corbusier's not yet widely published five points for new architecture.' (Pombo & Fisker, 2020, 32). Nevertheless, Gray integrated the principles of L'Esprit Nouveau through a personal interpretation of a modern dwelling as a place that should invite the expression of all the gestures belonging to daily life' fluctuations. The pieces of furniture Gray made from around 1913 to 1922 are often categorised as Art Deco, but by the time of the 1925 Paris Exposition, which was the first considerable showcase for Art Deco pieces, Gray had moved on, embracing the machine-age utopian vision of modernism in a particular critical version. Still her lacquer pieces are highly valued remaining just few of them. Accepting the functionalism, Eileen Gray conceived a house as an impressive setting of comfort and inventive design, articulating diverse functions in a large open plan to find the balance of mind, body and spirit in. A dining area, a place for tea, a place for siesta, a place to work and balconies are divided throughout the house E-1027 into functions that match the feminine and the masculine to achieve a gender-free living and working environment. "Gray was increasingly interested in making material objects with multiple purposes and uses. Unlike the domestic designs of her avant-garde male contemporaries, which included separate spaces for men and women to withdraw and to pursue different sorts of activities, Gray's solitary spaces and furniture were geared towards work and study and not associated with either sex. Gray's furniture designs were always integrated into the interiors. (Pombo & Fisker, 2020, 42). 'Beds fold into walls, a table becomes a desk, and the hall has her written instructions for visitors – *entrez lentement* and *défense de rire*. Instead of a sentimental seaside name for the house, Gray chose a streamlined numerological symbol for her relationship with her lover, the Romanian architect and critic Jean Badovici.' (Pombo & Fisker, 2020, 34). The house E-1027 which mirrors the Eileen Gray's concept of a dwelling full of ingenious thinking, built between 1926 and 1929, when she was 51 years old, underwent a negligible course when Gray, separated from Jean Bodovici, moved out from that place. Le Corbusier damaged her house by painting lewd murals on the walls during a visit, to an extend that Eileen Gray voiced as 'an act of vandalism'. This house survived all the misfortune and oblivion through years and succeeded to be again open to the public, restored with original techniques and materials, evoking as much as possible the atmosphere that Gray was able to create with an extremely commitment to each detail that costed her a remarkable emotional price. As Adam states: 'Eileen was in Roquebrune working on her new project, which took all energy and enthusiasm.' (2014, 181) and continues: 'Eileen remembered how lonely and tired she was at the end of each day. The only diversion was the daily swim in the crystal-clear water

right underneath the house. There was no one to talk to, and she took most of her meals alone, sometimes sharing a sandwich with the workers who lived on the site'. (2014, 191). Eileen Gray's career started out slow. She was a free spirit. Each of her pieces was special and different, made by Gray herself.

Lilly Reich's achievements enriches the history of design and the history of the women who break down obstacles that prevented them to perform professional careers. She collaborated with the Wiener Werkstätte in Vienna and with the Deutscher Werkbund in Munich, where she was one of the very few women to be admitted as a member in 1912. In 1920 she was elected the first woman to get a position on the board of directors. This recognition 'falls in line with a motion by Miss Margarete Naumann, which also called for the representation of the women of the German Werkbund on the board of directors.' (McQuaid, 1996, 14). In January 1932 Reich was the Master of the weaving studio and of the interior design workshop at the Bauhaus following an invitation of Mies van der Rohe who was the director since September 1930. Magdalena Droste affirms that 'Lilly Reich was one of the few women of her generation to obtain a position as a teacher in an art school. At the Bauhaus, only the class in weaving had been entrusted to a woman, Gunta Stözl, who taught there from 1925 to 1931. In other art schools it was almost impossible for women to fill positions having to do with anything other than weaving, embroidery or textiles. It was also extremely rare for women to be awarded professorships.' (1996, 55-56). Lilly Reich is a reference of the German avantgarde. Her talent and commitment for creating quality and character in the design scene left to women, as it was the design of interiors, furniture, clothing, granted her recognition at her time. After her partnership with Mies van der Rohe, history tends to consider Reich as the architect's collaborator as suggest Lizondo-Sevilla and Domingo Calabuig after a careful research on the topic: 'After associating with Mies van der Rohe, Lilly Reich increased the number of commissions and was able to enter more architectural sectors, but on the other hand, her work ceased to be recognized, and all traces of joint authorship faded away.' (2022, 2). Matilda McQuaid (1996) also declares that 'his [Mies van der Rohe] fame overshadowed her own contribution.' (9). She preserved her atelier till it was bombed in 1943 and it is possible to acknowledge her own work. If till about 1920 Reich's accomplishments were within the framework of women's culture as it was promoted by the division of functions, tasks and skills between women and men, in the decade of 1920s she was able to tackle other areas as the exhibition design which was growing into a very significant field for promoting German products both in Germany and abroad and to educate and influence the consumers' taste. 'Her success stemmed from the fact that she consistently applied avant-garde, objective aesthetics to the design of exhibitions. With this specialty, Reich broke through prewar paradigms of female professional practice that persisted into the period of the Weimar Republic, after the slow recovery of the German economy from world War I.' (Droste, 1996, 52). Among Reich responsibility in curating exhibitions, one from 1922 can be taken as illustration of her activity in the 20s: the exhibition of a selection of more than 1600 objects that were displayed at the Newark Museum in New Jersey. The selection of the objects intended to

disclose the core of the German Design, was made by Reich in a close collaboration of the German Werkbund with the Newark Museum. The immense enterprise of displacing such amount of objects to the USA and expose them in an exhibition that attracted more than 4000 visitors asks for distinct skills that Lilly Reich mastered. Many other successful exhibitions, for which she was responsible, came into light. She occupied the last year of her life to spread the Werkbund principles and thinking about the restructuring of the programs in schools. In the unpublished text of 1946 that Reich titled 'On the Reconstruction of the Schools', quoted by Matilda McQuaid (1996, 43), she writes: 'The domain of design must again be opened to all the forces of the people. This is the chief demand, and this can happen through a training that awakens the will to design.'

The Finnish architect and designer Aino Marsio-Aalto is still poorly addressed in interior design history as a talent on her own, once it is not yet finished the research that will clarify her participation in the common projects she developed with her husband Alvar Aalto. If that attempt will have a satisfactory response is also yet a doubt. Suominen-Kokkonen states that the travel diaries of Aino Marsio-Aalto are an important research material to assure that she 'had a significant position in Finnish industrial art and interior design, and cannot be ignored, although she was never placed at the same level as her husband.' (1992, 79). Beatriz Colomina in her article 'Couplings' (1999) underlines the fact that in a collaborative work like architecture even if it is recognized as a field of team work, usually 'a single figure is always privileged as author of the work. This is most evident in the case of couples, partnerships of two, whether they are professional or personal or both.' (1999, 23). This seems to be also reality in Aino and Alvar Aalto's case, as the office was called 'Alvar Aalto Architects'. That typical problem among the female professionals in a partnership, by marriage or not, still remains nowadays. (Pombo & Rumbin, 2016, 47-48). In effect, in the 1920s and mostly during the 1930s and 1940s Aino Marsio-Aalto participated in the architectural projects of private houses, apartment complexes or other building projects of the office she shared with Alvar Aalto. And in late 1930s and early 1940s when Alvar Aalto was engaged in lecturing in the United States of America or in architectural assignments abroad, it was Aino Marsio-Aalto who run the office alone which meant taking care of the office's client relationships, employee matters and financial issues. If Aino Marsio-Aalto came more into the light after the establishment of Artek in 1935, after her death, that occurred too soon, her name was remaining in the shadows. Due to the contribution of mainly Finnish researchers, Aino Marsio-Aalto is slowly emerging from the shadows and becoming acknowledged as a fascinating architect and designer with importance particularly in the realm of interiors. In the monography dedicated to Aino Marsio-Aalto (edited by Ulla Kinnunen in 2004) there is to read five enriching essays about Aino focusing in diverse aspects of her life, personality and creative work, namely 'On Aino Marsio-Aalto' by Arne Heporauta; 'Aino Marsio-Aalto, Architect' by Mia Hipeli, 'Aino Marsio-Aalto, Interior and Furniture Designer' by Kaarina Mikonranta, 'Aino Aalto as Photographer' by Marjaana Launonen and 'The Silent Central Personage, the Architect Aino Marsio-Aalto' by Renja Suominen-Kokkonen. In the above-mentioned essay, Arne

Heporauta discusses the decision of Aino to choose the profession of architect, which was at that time very much a male choice (Pombo & Rumbin, 2016, 46-47). As already stated in my previous article from 2016, in the pages 49-50, it is to read that Aino Marsio-Aalto deep interest and achievements in 'interiors' and all the artefacts needed to furnish them, affirmed the Nordic interpretation of Modernism with a perception that still influences the contemporary role of design in daily life, pointing to a practical understanding of dwelling combined with the quality of materials, the simplicity of forms and the dialogue with nature. Being a founder-member of Artek, she was always closely involved in the company's growing, assuming during the years 1941- 1949 the position of managing director. Artek also symbolizes the creation of a strong tradition for quality in daily life influencing both the Finns' furnishing habits and abroad. Artek acclaims the bond of standardization and the precision of technology with the Nordic praise for the authenticity of materials, the warmth of wood, the softness of colours, the quality of craftsmanship's legacy.

### **Remarks**

These three female designers created an oeuvre in their time with vision towards the future. Her legacy has an original handprint based upon their own merits. Aware of the modern rhetoric and of the language of the functionalism and rationalism, they interpreted the canons with innovation and strength while designing buildings, interiors, exhibitions, fashion, furniture, textiles, fabrics, glassware, ceramics, lighting fixtures. Their design proposals were in line with a human scale, in connection with nature and a sober aesthetics looking for the organic harmony between the spaces, the things and the users. Studies in Design have been shedding light to their life, career, work intertwined with the span of history that witnesses the diverse layers covering and uncovering the identity of their ideas, projects, masterpieces, efforts, struggles and fights. The encounter with these designers enlightens the role and functions that were expected women to perform in the society. So, it helps to interpret, as well, the impact of politics in defining educational opportunities, professional profiles, activities and ambitions, gender instrumentalization, expectations and recognition, exercise of power.

Eileen Gray, Lilly Reich and Aino Marsio-Aalto are an example of intelligence and audacity in the face of general hegemonic domination attempts over women by a male organisational system. They contributed through their profession as designers to challenge and to break down that normative pattern of practice. Other women designers did it too and some men designers were by their side.

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# Calabar: a visual cry for democracy

..... Priscila L. Farias

In 1973, multinational record company Philips launched in Brazil an album by the then already well known composer and singer Chico Buarque with what one may interpret today as a remarkably minimalist cover –all white, with essential information in black. The cover design was credited to visual artist Regina Vater, and, rather surprisingly, the authorship of photographs on ‘external’ and ‘internal’ covers was credited too (to photographers Gianfranco and Sergio da Matta, respectively). No photos, however, are to be found in this piece, which consists of a simple cover for one vinyl LP, and not a gatefold cover as the reference to a photo on the ‘inner cover’ would suggest.

While some might suppose that the white cover could be a reference to the Beatles’ ‘White Album’ (1968), or Caetano Veloso’s ‘Album Branco’ (1969), the apparently misleading credit lines in the back cover are should be read as a sign that the original album cover was censored by Brazilian dictatorial military regime (1964–1985). The Brazilian censorship scheme, intensified in 1972 with the creation of the Federal Police Public Entertainment Censorship Services (SCDP), led to the advent of showy white spaces on newspaper pages, where contents deemed inadequate for public release were cut out. In this case, the name of the musical theatrical play for which the album was a soundtrack –Calabar, o Elogio da Traição (Calabar, the Praise of Treason– was deemed inadequate, as well as the lyrics (or parts thereof) of some of the songs. The play tells the story of Domingos Fernandes Calabar, a historical figure born in what we now know as the Brazilian northeast, and who allied himself with the Dutch when they fought against the Portuguese for control of this region, in the 17th century. The plot suggests that Calabar’s treason had a laudable purpose, such as the treason to the Brazilian military dictatorship perpetrated by another historical figure, Army Captain Carlos Lamarca, who deserted to join the armed resistance, and was killed in 1971.

Arguably unhappy by the low attractiveness and low sales of the white cover, Philips would soon produce a more traditional and marketable cover for the same album, featuring a portrait of the artist and its new title –Chico Canta (Chico Sings), instead of the original Chico Canta Calabar (Chico Sings Calabar). Chico Buarque’s portrait, in this version, is silhouetted with the contours of the same ‘Chico Canta’ line found in the back cover of the white album, with design now credited to ‘Lobianco’ (possibly Pedro Hélio Lobianco).

The original cover conceived by Regina Vater for Chico Canta Calabar, however, is much more powerful and connected with the anti-dictatorial and pro-democratic political activism implicit in Chico Buarque and Mozambican film director and poet Ruy Guerra

theatrical play. The front cover of the album is dominated by the word Calabar in bold handmade uppercase letters of uneven height and contour, featuring dramatically ostensive paint dripping. The big white letters, that seem to have been obtained by a large round brush or spray, as in a graffiti, contrast with the background, portraying an old and dark derelict wall. The record company logo in white, on the upper right corner, and the name of the artist (Chico Buarque) on the lower right corner, in relatively small orange uppercase sans serif letters (possibly Helvetic) complete the composition. The photo of the derelict wall continues in the back cover, dominated by the album's title (Chico Canta) in big uppercase orange letters (set with a condensed grotesque type, possibly Impact), running vertically from bottom to top and completely filling the left edge of the cover. Back cover composition also includes smaller elements, all in white: information related to the record company (all set with a geometric sans serif type, possibly Futura), and a list of album production credits (set with a neo-grotesque sans serif type, possibly Helvetica). The inner panels of the gatefold cover feature a photo of a dozen young people, some of them dressed to look older, performing what Regina Vater described as a "lavish picnic on a gloomy deserted street as a metaphor for the alienation of the bourgeoisie". According to Vater, while the front cover photo was produced in São Paulo, on a deserted street in the Bixiga neighbourhood, close to downtown, the inner cover photo was produced in Rio de Janeiro, on a street in front of a garage building, next to Santos Dumont Airport. The subtitle of the play ("O Elogio da Traição", set with a script face, possibly Lydian) appears in big green letters on the bottom of the spread, and the composition is completed with the full title and credit text placed on the upper right side, set with a sans serif grotesque font (possibly Grottesca Reforma) in orange.

Chico Buarque and Ruy Guerra planned to premiere the musical play Calabar, o Elogio da Traição in November 1973, in Rio de Janeiro, launch a book with the play text, and to release the soundtrack album a month later, in December. They knew all cultural manifestations in Brazil at that time needed to be examined and eventually authorized by the Federal Police Public Entertainment Censorship Services (SCDP). Having received clearance for the text of the play in April 1973, they were waiting for clearance of the actual theatrical spectacle, based on the audition of rehearsals by SCDP authorities, at least since September of the same year. However, while the album with the soundtrack featuring songs partially authorized and the book were already released, the theatrical spectacle was censored as a whole in January 1974, and the use of the title 'Calabar' forbidden on any kind of media. This prohibition affected the album cover, and the solution found by Philips was to produce the white cover described above.

Copies of the album with the original cover, however, were already sold and circulated before the release of the white version cover. This is testified by the presence of mentions to SCDP on the bottom right corner of the back cover, both in the original and in the white version of the album still in the hands of vinyl collectors. A new version of the original cover was more recently released by Universal, with a slightly different back cover that does not mention SCDP.

Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1943, Regina Vater was a young visual artist with some relevant art exhibitions who had moved to São Paulo and was working as assistant art director in a trendy advertising agency in 1973 when theatrical director Fernando Peixoto asked her to design the cover for the soundtrack of a play he was directing, *Calabar*. This was actually her second job for Philips, the first being a colorful artwork for *Tropicália, ou Panis et Circencis* (an album featuring Caetano Veloso, Gal Costa, Gilberto Gil, Nara Leão, Os Mutantes and Tom Zé), released in 1968 with a completely different cover, designed by artist Rubens Gerchman. Vater remembers being in New York when she received the news that her cover for *Calabar* was being censored. She also remembers seeing her original artwork for *Tropicália* on the wall, framed, when she went to Phillips office to collect payment for her *Calabar* cover.

In an interview for the Archives of American Art, Regina Vater claims that the album cover was censored due to the use of graffiti —or, we could add, more precisely, what is known in Brazil as ‘pixação’—, a means of expression that was becoming popular among the youth for communicating dissent, and also prohibited by law. There is no mention, however, on official documents from the Brazilian Public Entertainment Censorship Services, as to the way in which the lettering piece in the cover of the album was obtained. The restrictions officially noted by the authorities refer to the controversial figure of *Calabar*, and to the ‘inconvenient’, ‘inconsequential’ and potentially ‘subversive’ way in which his act of treason was portrayed in the play. The bold visual statement produced by Vater’s dramatic lettering piece must not have passed unnoticed, and might have reinforced the message of political dissent present in the theatrical play and its songs.

The album cover design by Regina Vater also adapted for book cover (published by *Civilização Brasileira* in 1973), and a very similar version of the ‘*Calabar*’ lettering, differing on the number and shape of drippings, was included in the poster designed in 1980 by Elifas Andreato for the late inaugural season of the spectacle at *Theatro São Pedro*, in São Paulo. This shows how meaningful and successful the design was deemed to be by the authors of the theatrical play, producers and other designers, an impression that lasted unchanged over the years.

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# Democracy in the small, design at large

..... Johan Redström

In the Swedish design context I'm part of, questions of democracy have been part of designing since industrial design was first identified as central to the modern welfare project. Ranging from how to resolve the housing crisis that came with urbanisation and to provide the means for the new and more efficient everyday life that followed (for some key examples, see Asplund et al 2008), via the user-centred design that would evolve from these efforts (Göransdotter & Redström 2018), the emergence of sustainable design in the 1960's (Fallan 2022) and of participatory design in 1970's (e.g. Ehn 2017), questions of how design and use are related with respect to rights and influence have been central. Still today, companies such as IKEA, with reference to its origins in Sweden, states a commitment to 'democratic design' and "To create a better everyday life for the many people"<sup>1</sup>, thus maintaining the idea that the point of purchase carries with it a democratic aspect of choosing, and design therefore of creating opportunities to choose. The idea of democratic rights in relation to ownership can also be found in more critical stances towards consumption, as in the notion of 'right to repair'<sup>2</sup> and in the critique of how the possibilities and responsibilities involved in using something have been circumscribed by the service design optimised for business models based on subscriptions, effectively preventing users from repairing, and modifying things to fit their own needs (e.g. Collins et al 2024).

Against this backdrop, I would like to reflect upon two contemporary but seemingly opposed directions in design. Among the many trajectories in design, few lines of development seem further removed from each other than that of participatory design responding to democratic challenges "in the small" (e.g. Binder et al 2015, DiSalvo 2022, Ehn 2017) and the designing involved in how a few companies have turned global platforms of planetary-scale computation, including extensive use of 'artificial intelligence', into near-monopolies of what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) describes as 'surveillance capitalism' and Kate Crawford in detail accounts for as an inherently "extractive industry" (2021, p. 15). What is intriguing, however, is that despite their profound differences, when looking closer they also share striking similarities in how they challenge and change designing. And when two approaches to design with seemingly opposing relations to democracy intersect with respect to specific changes to designing, something important might be at stake.

1 <https://ikeamuseum.com/en/explore/the-story-of-ikea/democratic-design/>

2 For example <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240419IPR20590/right-to-repair-making-repair-easier-and-more-appealing-to-consumers>

Participatory design was already from the start highly situated. Early work in Scandinavia was done in the context of the workplace, in design responses developed together with trade unions to engage their rights to be involved in the technological transformations of the workplace (for a reflective account from inside practice, see e.g. Ehn 2017). Throughout this work there is a commitment to places, situations and contexts, to local knowledge, and to how people are experts of their own practices. An understanding of democracy as something unfolding and constantly changing influenced design to move in similar directions, towards unfinished things and design processes that evolve over time. As Binder et al argues, "participatory design approaches are particularly well equipped to let design give up its obsession with 'objects' and replace them with intertwined socio-material *things* or *thinging* that evolve over time" (Binder et al 2015, p153). As such, there is a de-emphasis on finished forms and instead a turn towards the prototype, the sketch, the improvised act. But such shifts from object outcomes to "socio-material assemblies that evolve over time" (ibid, p. 152) also involve profound reconfigurations of the relations between acts of design and use. This has shifted previous dichotomies of design/use into more fluid spaces ranging from collaboratively anticipating future use to continuous redesign made integral to what it means to be 'using' something.

If we instead turn towards one of the currently most significant democratic challenges when it comes to technological development – the massively networked computational platforms delivering social media optimised with artificial intelligence and other services at a planetary scale – we find several similarities in how traditional design is being challenged. Starting with design's said obsession with 'objects', it used to be the case that a product or service needed to be first designed, then manufactured and distributed, for actual use to be possible. The 'production' involved in these digital services, however, is in some key respects instant in how it can adapt in runtime, each instance customised based on contextual factors such as individual user behaviour, usage history, geographic location, and a wide range of parameters and predictions based on models created using massive amounts of data both collected and sourced (Redström & Wiltse 2019). In this way, it is a design output that is far more specific, more targeted to a specific 'local' condition (user, place, time, device used, etc.) than anything a traditional mass-produced design can aim for. As such, also here processes of design and use have become intimately intertwined.

Additionally, notions such as the 'minimum viable product' in combination with design processes releasing them as often as possible to gain feedback by tracking user behaviour, further collapse the distance between design and use. For instance, working with small but hyper-frequent changes to a product/service opens up for releasing different versions of a given design simultaneously in live A/B testing, each design's effectiveness recorded and the result immediately made effective in design decisions. To use another Swedish example, Spotify explains that they "have over 300 teams running tens of thousands of experiments annually", and further that "A/B testing and online experimentation is often narrowly described from this perspective only – as a tool for evaluating new, untested

ideas. ... In fact, at Spotify, experimentation serves an equally important second purpose: it's the way we release changes to our users."<sup>3</sup> This is not participation in the sense of participatory design, but it is a matter of transforming a use situation into something directly involved in a design process. In a way, it makes it impossible to 'use' something without also becoming part of how the scripting of use develops over time in both detail and depth. And with respect to evolving socio-material assemblages, many of these design decisions (especially in terms of customising how the service is delivered to a given user) are increasingly made by machines performing processes of 'artificial intelligence', making nonhuman 'designers' part of the process.<sup>4</sup>

And so, while certainly very different from each other, participatory design in the small and the global service platforms at large seem to share key characteristics in how they challenge previous forms of designing: both seem to be involved in collapsing distinctions between design and use; in destabilising the outcome of design as a matter of fixed and finished objects; they both turn towards the local and situated; and to the explicit inclusion of non-human actors.

In design, we have learned the hard way that neither design intent nor ethics necessarily translate into how approaches, methods, concepts, etc. come to be used outside their origins. In the context of hyperconnected computation we might want to remind ourselves that also in the early days of the internet and social media, notions of democracy, communal action and open sharing were at the forefront. If we instead turn to histories of how technology is made to appear in everyday life, much of their current form owes to the design approach and technology aesthetics developed at HfG Ulm, an educational institution explicitly created to foster international democracy through a combination of environmental design and political education<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, while the intention to hide technological and other complexities behind smooth surfaces once seemed to be the 'right' thing to do to empower people, this aesthetic has later become central to how technology is made opaque to a point where behavioural manipulation is not only possible but the core objective (Hauser et al 2023).

And so, to understand the foundational changes that the unfolding process of designing-using non-objects bring about, perhaps we need to take another good look at the relations between ethics-aesthetics historically so central to much design. While a notion such as what makes a certain design 'good' certainly involves culturally situated norms, it is also an expression of how we think ethics and aesthetics are related; how we conceive of the

3 <https://confidence.spotify.com/blog/ab-tests-and-rollouts>

4 E.g. <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2023-02-22/spotify-debuts-a-new-ai-dj-right-in-your-pocket/>

5 <https://hfg-archiv.museumulm.de/en/the-hfg-archive/history/>

relation between what a thing is meant to be and how it therefore needs to be present in the world. As such, what makes design 'good' in this more profound sense is not to be confused with what we think of as e.g. 'good taste', as it is a matter of consistency, coherence and, I would argue, transparency when it comes to how the ethics-aesthetics relations have been approached and resolved. Indeed, if we follow Jacques Rancière's suggestion that aesthetics is about 'the distribution of the sensible' (Rancière 2004), and thus about what is made present to whom, by whom, when and where, then it follows that "by assembling words or forms, people define not merely various forms of art, but certain configurations of what can be seen and what can be thought, certain forms of inhabiting the material world", and therefore how "the way in which, by drawing lines, arranging words or distributing surfaces, one also designs divisions of communal space" (Rancière 2007, p. 91).

And so even if we do not care for objects the way we once did in design, something about the crafting of materialities over time is still crucial. Connections between design and democracy not only come through acts of engagement or deliberation. It is also about the slow material processes that allow, or 'afford', them – or not. Perhaps because of this, there has been an awareness not only of process, but also of the resilient and even stubborn materialities that, for good and bad, slow things down. The ancient Greek notion of *demos* does not only refer to people, but also to their land, to that which is made possible by the relations between human and nonhuman lives and places (Cammack 2019). As we look for our places in the futures, in a 'life without objects' (cf. Lang & Menking 2003) where many materialities have been replaced by unfolding processes of change beyond our grasp and often even human touch, what slow materialities able to sustain processes of democracy will we hold on to? And, what new design aesthetics will guide us there?

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# Design and Democracy: Women's Rights Are Human Rights

..... Elizabeth Resnick

The relationship between design and democracy in socio-political poster exhibitions is dynamic and impactful. By amplifying marginalized voices, fostering civic engagement, promoting inclusivity, educating the public, empowering communities, enhancing public spaces, and leveraging digital platforms, exhibitions can significantly contribute to the health and vibrancy of democratic processes. Through thoughtful design and strategic display, socio-political posters become potent tools for democratic participation, inclusivity, and empowerment among a global populace.

Socio-political posters can serve as catalysts for change. They highlight underrepresented voices and pressing issues, bringing marginalized perspectives to the forefront and sparking conversations that can lead to significant policy changes. For instance, posters advocating for civil rights, environmental justice, or gender equality can draw public attention and initiate discussions that can shape policies. Well-designed posters —with their ability to simplify complex issues and inspire action — motivate civic engagement. They can encourage individuals to participate in voting, protesting, or community organizing, thereby contributing to the health of a democratic process. For example, posters with multilingual content or culturally diverse imagery can make various communities feel seen and respected, encouraging broader participation in democratic dialogue.

Access to broadband and mobile communications and digital production technologies has significantly expanded the potentiality of socio-political poster exhibitions to promote truly global conversations—coupled with unprecedented opportunities—for shifting attitudes. A viral online poster campaign or online poster websites like *Women's Rights Are Human Rights* can raise international awareness and foster a global democratic community.

For the past twenty years, my passion for socio-political design in the public realm has manifested in my university-level teaching and in four poster exhibitions I conceptualized, proposed, organized, and curated. *The Graphic Imperative: International Posters for Peace, Social Justice and The Environment* (2005) organized with design faculty-curators Chaz Maviyane-Davies and Frank Baseman; *Graphic Intervention: International Posters*

for AIDS Awareness (2010) organized with designer Javier Cortés; *Graphic Advocacy: International Posters for the Digital World* (2013) and *Women's Rights Are Human Rights: International Posters on Gender-based Inequality, Violence, and Discrimination* (2016).

*Women's Rights Are Human Rights* is an excellent example of the power that exhibitions can wield. As an issue-based visual narrative, *Women's Rights Are Human Rights* shines a spotlight on the daily reality of gender inequality, violence, and discrimination that all women face. Women's rights do not exist in conservative, patriarchal societies. Even in first-world communities, women are routinely and systematically discriminated against in the workplace, education, equal pay for equal work, health care coverage, and family leave policies. The exhibition features 123 posters created by men and women that acknowledge the vital role women play locally, nationally, and internationally in protecting and promoting human rights. By challenging religious and cultural norms and patriarchal attitudes that subordinate, stigmatize, or restrict women, the posters advocate for the elimination of discrimination against women and girls, empowering and advocating for equality while fostering universal human dignity.

In collecting these materials, my goal was to touch upon the most critical aspects of inequality, violence, and discrimination that many women face daily, starting with domestic violence and its acceptance as the 'norm' in many cultures, gender inequality and its abuses, gender and race discrimination, and lack of equal pay and respect.

The exhibition officially premiered in September 2016 in *The President's Gallery* at Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston, Massachusetts. Since then, it has been installed in university galleries and small museums in various cities within the U.S.: Taipei, Taiwan; Beijing, China; Crete, Greece; Seoul, South Korea; San Luis Potosi, Mexico; Warsaw and Krakow, Poland; Limerick, Ireland; Sheffield, UK; Zaragoza, Spain; and Pretoria, South Africa.

I was curious to learn how this traveling exhibit impacted the local communities where it was displayed. I reached out to prior organizers and participants and collected some memorable anecdotes.

Jane Norling, artist and poster designer: "Elizabeth began her project in the context of the Hillary Clinton campaign, where we observed Clinton's opponent's assault on her status as a woman. From the campaign to the presidency, *Women's Rights Are Human Rights*' imagery showed gender discrimination subjects forbidden by patriarchy to be taken seriously. As celebrities said 'enough' in 2017, describing sexual predation by men in control of their careers, the broader population of women in this country was empowered to say 'enough.' That sex crimes appear in today's media identified as 'criminal behavior' is remarkable. The exhibition, *Women Are Human Rights*, is part of this profound change."

Matthew Clay-Robison, gallery director, York College Galleries, York, Pennsylvania: “The *Women’s Rights are Human Rights* exhibition took place in our first-floor gallery at Marketview Arts, a space dedicated to community engagement. The gallery is in York’s downtown arts district and has a large window on the street. The night I installed the exhibit, a couple had stopped to watch as each poster went up. Soon, over two dozen people had stopped, faces pressed to the glass, waiting to see what poster I would put up next. That had never happened before, nor has it happened since. It was a true testament to the power of these posters. On opening night, I noticed a friend comforting her teenage daughter outside the gallery. When her daughter went back inside the gallery, I asked her if everything was OK. My friend sighed and smiled and replied that everything was OK. The exhibit provided an opportunity for a frank discussion about topics that had been awkward and difficult to discuss. The exhibition had elicited strong emotions and questions from her daughter, and for that experience, my friend was most grateful.”

Hatzin Escalante, student, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California: “The two posters, *Allowed* and *Allowed: One Year Later*, created by Saudi Arabian designer Mohammad R. Sharaf, caught my attention. The posters portrayed women wearing head coverings as being oppressed. I know several Muslim women were offended by this depiction because they felt empowered to make their own choice to wear a niqab, the traditional veil that covers a woman’s face. For me, the exhibit offered multiple perspectives from other countries while showing real problems women face. It also encouraged dialogue with women in my life about self-empowerment.”

Carmen Pérez Ramirez, educator and organizer of the exhibition in Zaragoza, Spain: “The opening day of the exhibit in Zaragoza was March 8, International Women’s Day. At the time, I was presenting the exhibition with a microphone in hand, and a large demonstration was passed in front of the art gallery door. I felt a special joy, a truly unique and memorable moment.”

Melissa M. Eddings Mancuso, educator and gallery director, Ohio Northern University, Ada, Ohio: “As gallery director, I heard from numerous faculty (all women) how important and timely this exhibit was. I wholeheartedly agree. This exhibition was powerful, visually stunning, and heartbreaking. That said, I found the student’s lack of response to or dialogue about the exhibit less than encouraging, especially considering all that had occurred since the #MeToo movement and Donald J. Trump took office. Sadly, many people in this rural community would prefer that things were back to the way they were when white men were making, enforcing, and benefitting from the rules.”

Sophia Shih, designer and educator, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan: “Woman’s rights are so often suppressed without notice, influenced by culture and tradition. The exhibition raised awareness and provoked deep reflection on this crucial topic in our university community.”

Marika Preziuso, Liberal Arts educator, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston, Massachusetts: “The exhibition offers a wide range of compelling images and text that reflect on the cross-cultural realities of gender discrimination and inequality, sexual abuse and violence on women, and the damage of gender stereotypes. The exhibition is also a wonderful paradigm-shifting space, where the narrative of women’s oppression becomes a powerful statement about women as global agents of social change. The selection of posters merits commendation not only for their high-quality design and superb visual effect but also for provoking a healthy discomfort and empathetic response in viewers.”

Anne H. Berry, design educator, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio: “To state that we are living in ‘unprecedented times’ is too inadequate to describe the challenges we are confronting globally. The obstacles are seemingly insurmountable, from climate change and authoritarianism to the persistence of poverty, violence, and inequality. And yet, as the images reflected in the *Women’s Rights are Human Rights* poster exhibition remind us, women have been and will continue to be on the frontlines of the conflict, even at the expense of our safety and security. It is up to us to nurture the seeds planted by those who have come before us and have made sacrifices by staying engaged in the fight. *Women’s Rights are Human Rights* acknowledges, honors, and makes us mindful of these struggles.”

See the power for yourself at [www.womensrightsarehumanrights.org](http://www.womensrightsarehumanrights.org)

# Equipping Designers for Democracy: Mock Trials in Design Education

..... **Fernando Secomandi**

Democracy is a formidable concept with numerous intersections in design and design education. This reflection explores a pedagogical experiment using the *mock trial* method and its potential to cultivate basic democratic principles in design students. Specifically, mock trials can enhance students' ability to engage in public debates, articulate their opinions on societal issues, substantiate their viewpoints while respectfully challenging others, and uphold equality in discourse. This innovative approach transforms the traditional design studio into a "courtroom," where students simulate legal proceedings on real-world controversies, navigating conflicting perspectives while honing their professional expertise.

## **Design for Our Future**

Upon entering the Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering (IDE) at TU Delft, where I teach, students encounter the portentous message "Design for Our Future" adorning the façade. When they graduate, they typically stand before it one last time, holding their diplomas for a commemorative photo. In crossing the faculty's front door upon arrival or departure, they can be sure that the education offered here truly shapes our shared future, not only locally but globally. This is a promise of design education that only a few institutions of comparable size to the IDE Faculty can fulfill.

What IDE students will often learn—like design students in institutions across both the Global North and South—is that designing carries significant responsibilities and is anything but straightforward. Nowadays, students are often asked to tackle societal challenges, and these are invariably complex. The future may appear deeply uncertain, with impending environmental collapse, developing wars, internal dissent, and border conflicts. How does a designer resolve these issues individually? What specific contributions can designers bring when working collaboratively? The lived experiences of those most affected by their decisions may seem distant and unfamiliar to students. Simultaneously, should students focus on benefiting others while they must address immediate personal challenges, such as learning to design with emerging technology to find a job? Is striving for the "social good" at odds with securing financial independence and a career?

In this troubling context, design educators must help students avoid two pitfalls: the trap of desperation, which can lead to paralysis, quick fixes, and passivity, and the trap of nihilism, which results in disengagement from meaningful contributions to shaping the future. The question of how to educate designers for successful integration into existing production-consumption systems is, of course, not new. In 1961, during the second General Assembly of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID, now the World Design Organization), Tomás Maldonado addressed the issue, envisioning the industrial designer as:

a man [sic] with high professional efficiency and great influence in the competitive society. Therefore, I see him neither as spectator nor as judge, but as active participant in the reality in which he acts and lives. Intensively dedicated, without doubt, to the task of equipping the world. But never in the extreme to ignore or to be indifferent against the conflicts, the calamities and the risks of the world which he wants to equip (Maldonado, 1961, p. 11).

How can educators properly equip design students while raising their critical awareness of social responsibility?

### **Design Justice and Emerging Technologies**

*Design Justice and Emerging Technologies* is a course developed as part of the recent revision of our Master's program *Design for Interaction*. This knowledge-based elective helps students explore the intersection of design, emerging technologies, and social justice while reflecting on their responsibilities as professional designers.

The course introduces historical and contemporary writings in design research that connect these topics. Through individual study and class discussion, students apply insights from the readings to analyze ongoing developments and controversies in the world. They present seminars on self-selected topics, and from these, a few issues are selected for litigation in a mock trial format.

In addition to these activities, students engage in self-reflective exercises inspired by Leslie-Ann Noel's (2023) techniques for examining one's positionality and recognizing social oppressions affecting others. As she states, "Knowing who I am informs what I want to change" (p. 4). I firmly believe that encouraging students to reflect for themselves on this principle through democratic debate should always accompany the assignment entrusted to them to design for our future.

### **A Tribunal for Technologies and Designers**

The two mock trials conducted this academic year focused on artificial intelligence (AI), an emerging technology that students overwhelmingly chose to discuss. This is unsurprising, given AI's growing significance and the ongoing debates about designing *for* and *with* it

in design education. However, complex challenges like this are often framed in ways that constrain students' ability to articulate their own positions. The mock trials aimed to do the opposite—encouraging students to develop their own understanding and proposals through critical thinking and respectful debate.

Traditionally used in legal education, mock trials engage students in litigating contentious issues by assuming opposing stances and performing roles such as attorneys, witnesses, and jurors. They prepare and exchange pre-trial briefs outlining their core claims and evidence. During the trial, they present opening and closing statements, interrogate witnesses, cross-examine opposing witnesses, and introduce supporting evidence.

In our adaptation, the jury for each mock trial consisted of student groups from the other trial. Rather than delivering a verdict or sentence, the jury provided feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of both teams' performances. The performing students then reached their own verdict, reflecting on the mock trial experience and determining their aspirations as socially responsible designers.

The course lasted a quarter, and the mock trial was conducted within two weeks, followed by a final week dedicated to reporting on the experience. One trial debated the potential banning of AI from design education due to its environmental impact. Students had to frame their arguments using Tony Fry's (2020) concept of *defuturing* and *unsustainability*. The second trial examined whether users have a moral duty to redesign AI systems that perpetuate social oppression. Students structured their arguments based on the theory of *user oppression* by Rodrigo Gonzatto and Frederick van Amstel (2022).

### **Being Both Spectator and Judge in Democratic Debate**

As a design educator with over a decade of experience teaching at various schools in Brazil and the Netherlands, I was genuinely impressed by the depth of engagement in the mock trials. I had not previously seen students develop such extensive knowledge of complex issues and their associated literature while reflecting on their learning objectives in such a short timeframe.

In retrospect, both the students and I recognized that a powerful feature of the mock trial—beyond creating an engaging competition—was the requirement to assume and enact distinct roles. Students were neither mere “spectators” nor “judges”; instead, they actively engaged with multiple perspectives, using self-reflection to form their own standpoints as budding professionals. Importantly, the necessity of explicitly articulating opposing arguments in pre-trial briefs compelled students to seriously consider alternative viewpoints, ensuring that their claims were substantiated effectively.

As a testament to the potential of mock trials in fostering democratic principles in design education, I conclude with a reflective quote from a Dutch female student with a

Bachelor's in Design at IDE. She participated in the mock trial on banning AI from design education. Her words eloquently demonstrate how democratic debate can equip design students to, as Maldonado envisioned, actively engage with the realities of their world while remaining committed to shaping the future, without indifference to ongoing conflicts:

'The trial forced us to acknowledge that the current state [of how AI is integrated into design education] is unsustainable [...] Our group's verdict—a cautious integration of AI with ethical safeguards—was a middle ground [...] As a designer educated in a European context with a high-level education, I benefit from the privilege of access to these cutting-edge technologies [...] The privileges I have come with the responsibility to recognize and challenge the systemic biases embedded within the tools we use and how these tools impact those outside my bubble, especially marginalized communities [...] We're living in a reality where AI development is dictated by a few dominant corporations with immense power [...] Right now, AI is optimized for speed, efficiency, and automation. It makes sense in a capitalist framework. But what if AI was optimized for social justice instead? [...] Instead of AI being a tool for monopolization, it could be a tool for redistribution of knowledge, of power, of resources. That's a vision worth fighting for [...] I'll be honest: my use of AI has been largely self-serving. It makes my life easier. [...] But these are individual benefits, not systemic solutions. Have I truly explored AI's full potential? Definitely not [...] How can I, as a designer, contribute to shaping AI's purpose? I should take a critical look at the projects that I'm working on in my education. Can I integrate it into my projects not just as a tool, but as a means to empower those who need it most? [...] Can I explore alternative AI models that aren't owned by monopolistic tech giants but rather serve community-driven goals? As a designer, I hold more power than I sometimes realize. No, I might not be able to dismantle Big Tech overnight. But I can make choices in my field that either reinforce or resist the existing power structures. That realization is crucial.'

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# Design and the struggle for democracy in Portugal: Maria Keil, images for freedom

..... **Maria Helena Souto**

Design is always political. To think about the design of a product or an image is to think about the translation of a thought, the materialisation of a debate of tensions and the mediation of ideologies.

Maria Keil (1914-2012), a pioneer of design in Portugal, whose vast and multifaceted work flawlessly reflects the discipline's capacity for civic and pedagogical intervention, developed the poster POR UM PORTUGAL LIVRE E MELHOR - VOTE CEUD<sup>1</sup> for the 1969 electoral campaign, the first legislative elections of the 'Marcelist Spring'<sup>2</sup>, a period that some believed to be one of change and openness in the old Estado Novo, but they soon realised that the sun in Maria Keil's poster wouldn't spill over, as the expressionist sun she had in mind made them guess in its colours of the Portuguese flag, in which green is overlaid with blood red, the sun's rays transmuted into a blood stain that spreads.

With the overthrow of Estado Novo on 25 April 1974, Maria Keil developed an intervention celebrating freedom by studying the cover of the album *Que Nunca Mais*, by Adriano Correia de Oliveira (1942-1982), released in 1975. Because one of the capabilities of graphic design is to project a thought onto an image that synthesises and symbolises a time, becoming the visual memory of events and changes, the album cover underlines the *Nunca Mais* (Never Again) of the title, the purpose of the generation that resisted the dictatorship to which Maria Keil belonged, resistance symbolised in those political prison bars that opened with April, freedom sacralised by a sun radiating hope, the impossible signifier in 1969.

1 CEUD - Comissão Eleitoral de Unidade Democrática (Electoral Commission for Democratic Unity) was formed by members of the democratic opposition to the authoritarian Estado Novo regime in Portugal for the 1969 legislative elections.

2 'Primavera Marcelista' historically refers to the initial period of Marcelo Caetano's government, formed between 1968 and 1970, marked by some social modernisation and signs of an apparent desire for political liberalisation, creating the expectation of a possible reform of the regime in Portugal, which never happened.



Maria Keil, poster for the 1969 election campaign



Maria Keil, cover of the album *Que Nunca Mais* by Adriano Correia de Oliveira. Orfeu, 1975.



Mário Soares at CEUD headquarters on the eve of the 1969 parliamentary elections. Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation

Maria Keil was acquainted with the reality of political prisoners, both through her many colleagues, close friends and her husband, architect Francisco Keil do Amaral (1910-1975), and because she herself had gone through the harsh experience of being arrested by the political police of the Estado Novo, when she was arrested by PIDE at Lisbon airport in 1953, while waiting with others for the return of Maria Lamas (1893-1983), a journalist, writer and feminist, who was returning from the Peoples' Congress for Peace in Vienna; Following this arrest, Maria Keil was detained in Caxias prison for two months<sup>3</sup>.

Maria Lamas was responsible for the publication, between 1948 and 1950, of the book entitled *As mulheres do meu país* (*Women of My Country*), a work deliberately published in instalments to circumvent censorship. A portrait of the condition of Portuguese women in the first half of the 20th century, Maria Lamas travelled around the country between 1947 and 1949, travelling from north to south and the islands, to show the difficulties experienced by Portuguese women and the particularities of their lives, especially those in rural areas, where she encountered poverty, ignorance, superstition, obscurantism, a lack of basic hygiene and health conditions and an almost total lack of medical care.

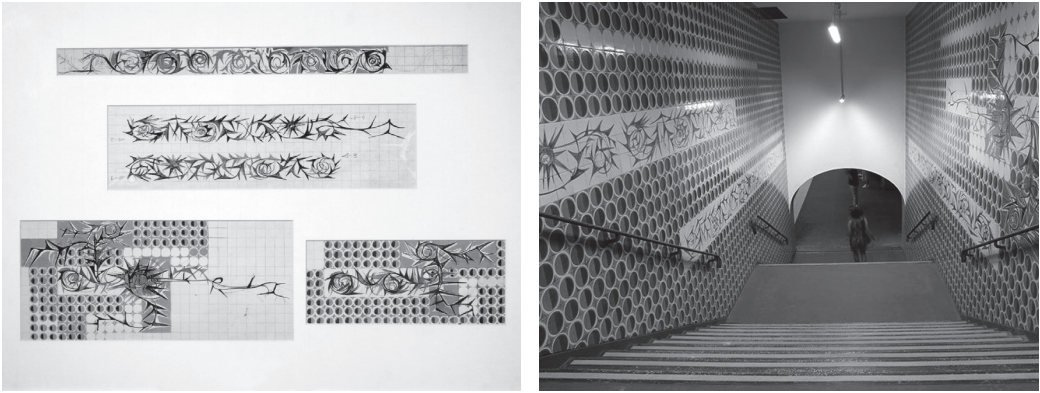
<sup>3</sup> Cf. MANTAS, HAJIS (2012). Maria Keil, 'uma operária das artes' (1914-2012) Portuguese art of the 20th century. PhD in Humanities, in History, specialising in History of Art. Faculty of Letters, University of Coimbra, Vol. I, pp. 446-447 [polycopy].

Many years later, already in the hectic times of building a democracy, in 1975, Maria Keil had the opportunity to develop, at the invitation of CTT (The Portuguese Postal Service), the studies for the issue of stamps commemorating what was the first International Women's Year, proclaimed at the 27th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, which took place at the end of 1972. To celebrate International Women's Year, the UN held various events in Mexico City between 19 June and 2 July 1975, including the First World Conference on Women and the recognition of 8 March as International Women's Day, a date officially formalised two years later in 1977.

Portugal, through the MDM (Women's Democratic Movement,) joined the celebration. Establishing a commission that carried out several initiatives throughout the year to promote gender equality and the full integration of women in development programs. As mentioned before, it was up to Maria Keil to create a series of four stamps for the event, in which she decided to pay tribute to working women, representing them in different activities - nurses in a hospital, harvesters in a wheat field, administrators in an office and factory workers. The layout strategy is repeated in the four designs: in the foreground there is a young female figure at work and, in the background, other women performing the same profession; still linking the four compositions is the icon of a dove in which the feminine symbol is inscribed, a rhythmically engraved leitmotif that reinforces the celebratory message. The Portuguese Communications Foundation owns the originals of these stamps,



Maria Keil, original drawings from the commemorative stamp issue – “International Women's Year”, 1975. Technique: gouache on paper. CTT Collection/Portuguese Communications Foundation.



Maria Keil, projects for the station cladding. From metropolitan Anjos, 1965. National Tile Museum, Lisbon.

a set of four drawings painted in gouache on paper; the stamps were “printed in offset by the National Press-Casa da Moeda on enamel paper esmalte”<sup>4</sup>

Maria Keil, a fighter for women’s causes, was a member of the National Council of the MDM (Democratic Women’s Movement) between 1977 and 1992, which awarded her the Distinction of Honor in 1999, and she also designed the logo that continues to identify the MDM: a red poppy. Throughout her vast and multifaceted work she always sought to reject the system of outdated arts, crossing languages, forms and techniques, in a polygraphy that spans artistic worlds: painting, graphic design (illustration, book and magazine covers, advertising, posters and stamps), sets and costumes, furniture and interior design, tapestry cards and, with particular importance, tile design that place her in the history of post-war Portuguese tilemaking, as one of the key figures for the renewal of ceramics for wall coverings. As part of a group of artists who, through different means, began to use tiles in large public art projects, she left several interventions in Lisbon that are part of the heritage of the capital’s contemporary tile work.<sup>5</sup>

Her work was a means of pedagogical and civic intervention, simultaneously playful and artistic, capable of projecting images that, with the tile interventions, especially with the central core of the coverings of the first stations of the Lisbon metro - make it a constant presence in the daily life of the capital and constitute a democratic visual memory for the people of Lisbon and its visitors.

4 “(...) in sheets of 50 stamps with 13.5 perforation. 6 million \$50 stamps were issued in lilac-based polychrome, 5 million \$2.00 stamps in brown-based polychrome, 1 million \$3.50 stamps in brick-based polychrome and 500 thousand \$8.00 stamps in gray-based polychrome. A phosphorescent stripe was printed on these stamps. They were put into circulation on December 30, 1975.” Kulberg, Carlos (2006). *Stamps of Portugal – Album IV (1971-1978)*, 2nd ed., Braga: Edições Humos, p. 64. [Available on-line: [https://www.fep.up.pt/docentes/cpimenta/lazer/html/ebook/bfd007\\_p.pdf](https://www.fep.up.pt/docentes/cpimenta/lazer/html/ebook/bfd007_p.pdf)].

5 SOUTO, MH (2016). “*Maria Keil (1914 – 2012)*”, in *MoMoWo. Women. Architecture & Design Itineraries across Europe*. Ljubljana and Torino: ZRC SAZU, 2016, pp. 75-76.

# Triangle design, nature and democracy

..... Ana Thudichum Vasconcelos, Inês Veiga, Mariana Rosa

## Caring/ the planet is the limit

The Triangle design, nature and democracy emerges as a way of emphasizing the importance of life and respect for the other, even for non-human beings. Thus, intertwining democracy and nature occurs through the need of caring for the collective space in detriment of the eulogy of the Self.

According to Fisher and Tronto, the relation between design, democracy and nature can be understood by means of the concept of care. The authors define it as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world,’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (2022, p. 162).

To understand our current dilemma, Boylston (2019), reminds us that we are at a level of consciousness<sup>1</sup>, yet in disbelief of the incapacity to forecast or anticipate the consequences of our human action on the ecosystems – in view of the technological evolution in which we have invested –, but already competent to try to understand, experiment and test different ways of transforming and changing the course of the possible upcoming “futures”.

Boylston’s (2019) positive vision, as well as that of other authors, is that design is one of the crucial subject areas to re-orient the regenerative path of life on the planet.

As designers, our perspective lies between the concepts of *Regenerative Design* and *Living Centered Design* and we also propose the *Biocentric Design* or *Biocentrism* for reflection.

Collet defines: “Regenerative design is a holistic design process, often place-based that supports conditions conducive to life (...) With regenerative design (...), the focus - and starting point - is the positive and restorative impact of the biosphere and communities” (2021/ 22, p.8).

1 “(...) they work when turning specifically available issues in a way as to make the “possible” tangible, formable and at the reach of committed and diversified citizens. At the heart of democracy is the option of disagreeing and exploring alternatives. The experiments of democratic design are, above all, committed to continuously finding new forms of emerging public, and aim at enriching the repertoire of democratic expression forms. (Binder et al., 2015, p.163)

For Paoliello, *Living-Centered Design* invites us to acknowledge and embrace other living organisms' intelligence and productive abilities, offering a transformative approach to design (2024, p. 263).

Finally, it is important to reflect ethically about how we should position ourselves in the world. *Biocentrism* equates the ethical vision "of the reality that puts nature at the center, or values things in terms of the ecological, as opposed to human-centred values" (Birkeland, 2007, p. 252).

### **Reconnecting/ Nature as the starting point for design action**

Hereby, nature is viewed under the perspective of the common good, the inheritance we need to take care of. We do not intend to make interpretations, find explanations or make transpositions between natural systems and human systems. On the contrary, we wish to mitigate the boundary that, historically, we have created with nature.

This dimension is far beyond the perspective of exploitation of the natural world. It stresses the importance of paying attention, listening carefully and being more aware of the relation of "being with" and "making with" the other, and with nature.

We are increasingly faced with the lack of acknowledgement of nature, which translates into its devaluation. This lack of attachment to the natural world produces, for instance, the logging of trees, the massive extinction of animal species, and the lack of budget available for the protection and appreciation of the natural systems.

As human beings, we depend on nature for the most basic needs, breathing and eating, but also for psychological balance, as Lucy Jones (2020) mentions in her book, *Losing Paradise*.

The distancing we have been witnessing, as a result of the population's displacement to the big urban centres, has been producing lack of knowledge and vocabulary regarding names of plants, names of vegetables or even the absence of references concerning the seasonality of food elements. It has made children spend less time in the open. And, yet, science has been demonstrating the importance of nature also at the level of brain performance.

Two hours in the forest can lower the levels of cytokine in the blood, soothing inflammations.

Good practices come from Ecuador, where in 2008, a new constitution was adopted in which nature rights are included; the approval of Mother Nature's rights in Bolivia, in 2010, or the creation of seed banks in the Arctic, Svalbard in Spitsbergen, and all the others that followed.

At an urban level, a new concept appeared – *biophilic* cities linked to ecological urbanism.

Reference cities linked to Biophilia are Detroit, and the city state of Singapore. For diversified reasons, both adopted measures of valorisation of nature. In twenty years, Detroit implemented more than one-thousand, five-hundred gardens and small urban farms (Jones 2023, p. 210) as a reaction to the abandonment of the city's retailers. Singapore, in turn, has been investing on the creation of green spaces, currently having the highest percentage of urban treetops in the world: around 29,3% compared to 12,7% and 8,8% in the city of London and Paris, respectively (Jones 2023, p. 214).

The way design relates with nature and democracy involves the promotion of participatory systems, the ability to empathise and communicate complexity which are inherent to democracy (Innerarity, 2021). We also adopt an expanded view of design (Escobar, 2018) to respond to complex problems. These are inherent to life existence, they are a part of our reality and of the need for a sustainable development, equated by the UN through the objectives of sustainable development (SDG).

Due to individuals' social and cultural specificities, this *design* is not based on the hegemony of universal proposals for problems. In opposition, it seeks to explore and value the local context with its specificities and in the *biocentric* and identity-related relation of the communities. It's a design of plurality, coexistence and biodiversity.

### **To mobilize/ collaboration to solidify democracy and sustainability**

The action of design herein takes on the responsibility of supporting, mobilizing and structuring partnerships to conceive and develop ideas, collectively, for the common good. We understand collaboration as a paradigm to activate communities and organizations into triggering and developing the necessary changes, by and for themselves. To act in/ for Democracy/Sustainability requires literacy regarding "social forms" and the "relational material" of which they are made (Manzini, 2017). According to Manzini, relations cannot be conceived but touching the social-physical characteristics of the ecosystem in which they occur, their connections, affinities and, consequently, the social forms they originate, can be streamlined and eased. If we think that humans coexist and live in radical interdependence with non-human and beyond the human agents and beings (Escobar, 2018), intervening for Democracy/Sustainability involves revealing such radical interdependences, which are involved in the current complex challenges, and supporting a collaborative exploration of what is necessary to take care, repair, weave again, and/ or imagine new future forms of interdependence (Huybrechts et al, 2021). To act in/ for Democracy/ Sustainability, brings about a set of responsibilities and competences at the level of sociability. On the one hand, it's about projecting the adequate ways and means capable of guaranteeing that diversified voices are heard and acknowledged, and their visions are incorporated, represented and translated in the design of, and in the, collective results (Huybrechts et al, 2021). On the other hand, it requires *being a sociable*

*designer* (Tjahja & Yee, 2022) capable of transcending the false neutrality, objectivity and disengagement, and the ghost of the hero, which sometimes accompanies designers in their discourse about the profession, and their socially, politically and ethically engaged practices.

### **To empower/ designers as facilitators**

There is a need for ways of thinking and making design based on democratic principles so that future generations can prosper in a resilient way. This way, to attain a collective future that benefits all forms of life, it is fundamental that design transcends the short-term vision, solely centred on the human being (Muratovski and Mau, 2022). At an operational level, designers should question the long-term implications of their choices, and consider the impacts on a broader scale, promoting services, systems, practices, and mechanisms, amongst others, which sustain life in all its forms (Muratovski and Mau, 2022).

This change implies that designers take on a broader responsibility, become more actively critical of their work and of the mainstream practices in the discipline, promote democratic dialogue in interdisciplinary contexts and, lastly, adopt a holistic approach while dealing with intricate and systematic problems.

Designers should legitimate acts of care and become transparent regarding their intentions acknowledging interdependent responsibility in processes, relate respectfully to the contexts and communities with which they collaborate, contribute to imagining different realities, and also think about reality in different ways. While providing alternative ways of building the collective present and futures with all those involved through democratic values, designers contribute to the practice of *design as democracy*, according to Manzini and Margolin (2017).

The invitation to the designer-citizen to take part (Margolin 2014, p.31) is fundamental to enable spaces where everyone collaborates and is represented in the regenerative proposals, by means of their constant inter-relations, wherein care is also a means of strengthening the community-related relations between humans and non-humans.

### **To put into effect/ regenerative spaces for a collective sustainable future**

According to Stengers (cit. DiSalvo, 2022), the notion of caring for the possible is one of the purposes of design approaches in civic education. This practice involves nurturing imagination and civic practices through the continuous development of new possibilities. The act of caring for the possible is both a present concern, and an orientation towards the future, considering that it gathers ways of identifying and expressing potential future needs. In this scope, the designer prioritizes the strengthening of interdependent bonds and promotes closeness, acknowledgement and the valorisation of nature. According to this view, design practice in democratic contexts becomes a way of together taking care of the present and the future (DiSalvo, 2022).

To conclude, the triangle between design, nature and democracy is materialized through the creation of social forms or “social spaces” or arenas and biophilic spaces. Spaces for dialogue and care, which require action, regeneration and constant attention. Spaces with future and where the projection of our common future may take place.

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# Inclusive Design: Nurturing Democracy in Portugal

..... **Paula Trigueiros**

‘Inclusive is comprehensive, evolutionary and complex - and very topical. Inclusion is about recognising diversity, the rights and values of democracy, of civilisation as we see it today’. (Trigueiros, 2024, p.14)

## **Inclusive Design and Democracy**

Inclusive Design, at its core, aims to create a world where everyone can participate fully, regardless of their abilities. By addressing diverse needs and perspectives, it breaks down barriers and fosters a sense of belonging for all. This essay explores the relationship between Inclusive Design education and practices, demonstrating how they are intrinsically linked to the values and principles of democracy. Moreover, it highlights the importance of embedding inclusive values and practices into the education of future designers, fostering more critical and informed citizens. It is grounded in contributions and reflections recently published in the book *Inspiring Designers – Mapping as Means to Inspire Inclusion through Design* (Trigueiros, 2024).

As designers, we are witnessing a profound transformation in our discipline, driven by the increasing complexity of contemporary challenges. To address these complexities, design must interact with other disciplines, embracing multifaceted perspectives to create truly holistic and effective solutions. The need for interdisciplinary collaboration is particularly evident in Inclusive Design, where the goal is to create products, services, and environments accessible to all, regardless of their abilities. The complexity of the challenges we face demands that design transcends its traditional boundaries and adopts a more collaborative and participatory approach. Several voices from academia refer to the need to reflect and adapt design teaching to the complexity and uncertainty inherent in today’s new paradigms. The ethical foundations and social role of design, as well as its basis based on critical thinking, characterize design activity and therefore do not change. Inclusive Design serves as a cornerstone of democratic values by fostering equal access, encouraging active civic engagement, combating discrimination, driving innovation, and educating responsible citizens.

Inclusive Design recognizes that the best solutions emerge when diverse voices and perspectives are considered, particularly those of people with disabilities and other marginalized groups. At its heart, democracy depends on ensuring that all citizens have equal opportunities to participate in society.

Inclusive Design addresses this principle by promoting the creation of products, services, and environments accessible to everyone, regardless of their abilities. By removing barriers, it empowers individuals and nurtures a sense of equal citizenship.

Moreover, democracies thrive on active citizen participation, and Inclusive Design encourages this by involving people with disabilities and other marginalised groups in the design process. When diverse voices are heard and incorporated, solutions become more responsive to community needs, fostering greater civic engagement and a stronger sense of collective ownership.

Inclusive Design also challenges discrimination, which undermines democracy by creating inequalities and denying fundamental rights. By promoting inclusivity, it dismantles prejudices and builds a society where everyone feels valued and respected.

In addition to addressing social equity, Inclusive Design stimulates innovation and drives social progress. Democracies must evolve to meet the changing needs of their citizens, and the diverse perspectives embraced by Inclusive Design challenge conventional thinking, resulting in solutions that benefit everyone. This commitment to inclusivity reflects the essence of a thriving democracy.

Finally, education plays a crucial role in shaping democratic values. Integrating Inclusive Design into educational curricula provides future designers with a profound understanding of accessibility, inclusivity, and social responsibility. This approach nurtures skilled professionals who are also engaged citizens, dedicated to creating a more just and equitable world.

### **Fostering Democracy Through Inclusive Design: Stories from Portugal**

The five stories presented in the referred book offer compelling examples of how Inclusive Design education and practices in Portugal are actively promoting democratic values.

- **The Right to Design:** This story showcases how Inclusive Design empowers individuals with disabilities by giving them agency and control over their lives. Projects like the “UrinALL” device, designed to provide autonomy and privacy for individuals with urinary catheters, promote individual dignity and independence.
- **The Good Problem:** This story emphasizes the importance of identifying and addressing problems that are relevant to a diverse range of people. By focusing on the needs of those who are often overlooked, such as amputees or the elderly, Inclusive Design leads to innovative solutions that benefit everyone. Projects like “Dedeta,” a pen designed to be gripped by a finger, illustrate how solutions initially intended for specific needs can have broader applications.

- **Small Interventions with a Big Impact:** This story demonstrates how seemingly small changes in public infrastructure can have a significant impact on inclusivity and accessibility. The analysis of Metro do Porto's ticket vending machines and the proposed adjustments, such as simplified interfaces and swipe navigation, highlight the importance of considering the needs of all users, especially those with disabilities, in the design of public services, ensuring equal access for all citizens.
- **Workstation for Alberto:** This story underscores the value of collaboration and partnership in promoting Inclusive Design. The creation of a personalized workstation for Alberto, an individual with a rare illness - Friedreich's Ataxia - involved collaboration between students, a social institution, and a furniture company, showcasing how collective efforts can lead to practical and impactful solutions that empower individuals and enhance their participation in the workforce.
- **Inclusive House of the Future:** This story emphasizes the power of dissemination and public awareness in promoting Inclusive Design. The exhibition of student projects at the Museu das Comunicações in Lisbon provided a platform to showcase innovative and inclusive solutions, raising awareness about the importance of accessibility and challenging societal perceptions about disability. By bringing Inclusive Design into the public sphere, the exhibition fostered dialogue between innovation and inclusion.

These stories, spanning different contexts and design challenges, offer a compelling narrative of how Inclusive Design education and practices in Portugal are making a tangible difference in promoting democratic values. The five stories presented in the book illustrate how Inclusive Design can be applied in practice. They demonstrate the importance of the active involvement of people with disabilities in the design process; the use of participatory and co-design methods; developing empathy and a deep understanding of users' needs; disseminating knowledge and fostering cultural change, towards inclusion. This will only become a reality when it is integrated into design education and professional practice.

### **Inclusive Design and the Future of Democracy**

The stories from Portugal underscore how Inclusive Design education and practices align with and strengthen democratic principles. By removing barriers, amplifying marginalized voices, and fostering innovation, Inclusive Design contributes to a society where everyone has the opportunity to participate and thrive. As democracy continues to evolve, design will remain an essential tool in addressing the complexities of inclusion and equity, shaping a world that reflects the core values of representation, participation, and social justice.

Through its commitment to Inclusion, design contributes to building the foundation for a democratic and equitable society. In this way, Inclusive Design strengthens the collective fabric of democracy.

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# Design Thinking - A Catalyst for Democratic Collaboration and Transdisciplinarity

..... **Katja Tschimmel**

In today's rapidly evolving society, the ability to innovate in a sustainable form and solve complex problems is crucial. Design Thinking, a life-centred approach to sustainable innovation, has emerged as a powerful method to address these challenges. By fostering democratic collaboration and encouraging transdisciplinary approaches, Design Thinking not only enhances creativity and problem-solving but also promotes inclusivity, participation and thus shared responsibility.

## **Design Thinking: An Overview**

In recent years, the concept of Design Thinking has undergone significant evolution, with scholars and practitioners identifying distinct phases: design thinking 1.0 (as cognition), Design Thinking 2.0 (as an innovation method), and the emerging Design Thinking 3.0, where artificial intelligence (AI) is anticipated to play an important role. To understand this trajectory, we must first explore its origins and development.

## **The History and Development of Design Thinking**

The origins of Design Thinking can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s within the realms of design and engineering. During this period, designers and cognitive scientists sought to formalise the processes underlying creative and rational problem-solving in design. Influential contributions came from theorists such as Nigel Cross (1982, 1992), Bryan Lawson (1986), Gabriela Goldschmidt (1994, 1997), and John Gero (1999). These scholars laid the groundwork for understanding the cognitive processes inherent to design practice. A landmark event in the evolution of Design Thinking occurred in 1991 with the establishment of the Design Thinking Research Symposium (DTRS). This symposium became a central platform for interdisciplinary discourses on design thinking across various design fields.

By the late 1990s, the term Design Thinking (DT) began to gain traction, largely due to the efforts of academics and practitioners such as David Kelley, founder of IDEO, and his colleagues at Stanford University. They emphasised a human-centred approach, prioritising the needs and experiences of users. This shift marked the transition to what is

now recognised as the second generation of Design Thinking or Design Thinking 2.0. Tim Brown's book, *Change by Design* (2009), further popularised this approach, presenting Design Thinking as a versatile method applicable beyond traditional design disciplines.

Initially a niche research domain, Design Thinking has become a widely adopted framework for innovation across industries, including business, education, and public administration. It addresses complex challenges with iterative, user-centred methods, fostering creativity and adaptability. However, its broad application has also raised concerns about diluting its original intent, as discussed at the 2022 DTRS'13 conference, titled *Expanding the Frontiers of Design: A Blessing or a Curse?* Critics argue that as Design Thinking 2.0 expanded to non-design disciplines, it sometimes became a superficial tool, prioritising quick wins over deep problem-solving and misinterpreting its core principles, such as empathy and iterative exploration.

As the field continues to evolve, the integration of artificial intelligence heralds the dawn of Design Thinking 3.0, promising enhanced creativity and solutions to complex societal challenges. While AI offers opportunities to augment ideation and streamline problem-solving, critics caution against over-reliance on technology, which might undermine the human-centred ethos at the heart of Design Thinking. There is also a risk that AI-driven processes could prioritise efficiency over inclusivity, potentially sidelining diverse perspectives in favour of algorithmic convenience.

Upcoming events like the DTRS'15 conference in 2026 will explore this potential further, seeking a balance between technological integration and preserving Design Thinking's democratic and collaborative spirit. Design Thinking's evolution underscores its adaptability and enduring relevance in a rapidly changing world, but its future will depend on critically addressing these challenges to maintain its transformative potential in collaborative projects.

### **Key Principles of Design Thinking**

Design Thinking is guided by principles that shape its innovative and life-centred approach. At its core is a focus on people's needs, desires, and experiences, with empathy enabling designers to understand and address user challenges deeply. Collaboration is fundamental, involving diverse stakeholders and fostering transdisciplinary teamwork. Open dialogue and collective participation lead to richer, more effective solutions. Central to the creative nature of Design Thinking is a commitment to divergent exploration and experimentation. The process encourages playful thinking, the willingness to make mistakes, and learning by doing. Visualisation simplifies complexity by making abstract ideas tangible. Tools like sketching and quick prototyping help teams clarify concepts and build shared understanding. Recognising that solutions exist within broader systems of interactions, Design Thinking adopts a holistic perspective, ensuring sustainability and alignment with the larger context of a project. Finally, iterative problem-solving through prototyping,

testing, and refining allows teams to adapt and improve dynamically, delivering outcomes well-suited to users and their environments. Together, these principles drive Design Thinking's ability to foster creativity, inclusivity, and adaptability, making it a powerful framework for addressing complex societal challenges.

### **Design Thinking and Democracy**

Design Thinking and democracy share foundational values such as inclusivity, participation, and collaboration. By fostering dialogue and co-creation, Design Thinking nurtures a culture where diverse perspectives converge to tackle shared challenges. Similarly, democracy thrives on the exchange of ideas, evidence-based decision-making, and collective action. Together, they offer complementary frameworks for addressing complex societal issues.

Ezio Manzini (2019) describes democracy as “a regime capable of learning,” emphasising its openness to change and ability to harness human creativity for collaborative projects. A pertinent example is Portugal's unique journey toward democracy, particularly through the Carnation Revolution in 1974, which peacefully transitioned the nation from dictatorship to democratic governance. This event underscored the power of collective action and the importance of iterative decision-making. Portugal's democratic evolution serves as an inspiration for how societies can embrace collaboration and adaptability to overcome challenges.

Democracy's inherent adaptability aligns with Design Thinking's iterative, life-centred approach, where reflection and co-creation drive shared understanding. Democracy can be broadly categorised into representative and participatory models. Representative democracy, a hallmark of modern political systems, relies on elected officials to make decisions on behalf of the population, aiming to balance equality and liberty (Rocha, 2019). However, it may create a disconnect between citizens and decision-makers. Participatory democracy, in contrast, involves direct engagement of citizens in governance, fostering ownership and inclusivity. Design Thinking bridges these models by enhancing engagement in representative systems and naturally aligning with participatory practices. It provides tools for collaboration and dialogue, enabling governance to balance efficiency with inclusiveness while adapting to contemporary challenges creatively. When integrated into democratic processes, Design Thinking transforms democracy into a dynamic, collaborative space where decisions are human-centred, and all participants have an equal opportunity to contribute. This synergy strengthens democratic ideals and equips societies to address challenges with creativity, equity, and collaboration.

### **Democratic Collaboration and Transdisciplinarity through Design Thinking**

Transdisciplinarity, which seeks to integrate perspectives across fields, is essential for solving complex modern problems. Unlike multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches, it goes beyond combining knowledge to synthesise holistic, systems-oriented solutions.

This principle resonates with both Design Thinking and democratic ideals.

Design Thinking fosters transdisciplinarity by encouraging collaboration among experts, policymakers, and communities. It creates spaces where diverse perspectives converge, enabling solutions that are innovative and rooted in the needs of stakeholders. By valuing each participant's contribution and breaking down hierarchies, Design Thinking ensures equity, transparency, and inclusion in decision-making.

Through the application of visualisation techniques and iterative prototyping, Design Thinking helps collaborators bridge disciplinary divides, creating a common language for dialogue. This approach not only advances innovation but also strengthens democratic cultures by promoting mutual respect, shared understanding, and collective action. By embracing transdisciplinarity, Design Thinking becomes a powerful enabler of democratic collaboration, integrating diverse voices into the process of shaping the future.

### **Empowering Citizens and Communities through Design Thinking**

What if governance could adapt as fluidly as the challenges it faces? What if every voice, regardless of its origin, carried equal weight in solving societal problems? These are the promises Design Thinking offers to democracy by involving citizens in designing and implementing local solutions. Grassroots initiatives, driven by community collaboration, exemplify this approach in areas such as sustainability, social justice, health, and education.

For example, the Rebuild by Design initiative in New York engaged communities to develop resilient infrastructure after Hurricane Sandy (<https://rebuildbydesign.org/>). This project combined global expertise with local leadership, enabling citizens to address overlapping environmental and human-made vulnerabilities effectively. By equipping communities with tools for co-creation and dialogue, Design Thinking strengthens grassroots efforts, ensuring solutions are deeply aligned with local needs and realities.

In this way, Design Thinking enhances both the practice and ethos of democracy, empowering individuals and communities to address challenges collaboratively and creatively.

### **Successful Design Thinking Stories in Democratic Processes**

Before introducing more examples of successful Design Thinking applications in democratic processes, let us engage in a brief mental exercise. Imagine a city aiming to redesign a neighbourhood using the principles of a 'smart city' with integrated digital solutions. Alternatively, envision a public institution tasked with creating a citizen-focused space to provide neutral, objective information about sustainable energy solutions. Which approach would you prefer: hiring a design agency to develop a smart city neighbourhood or to design the energy space? Or would you rather engage citizens directly in shaping their neighbourhood's urban development or co-creating the energy space concept alongside

a range of stakeholders? Both methods can yield valuable results. While professional designers may produce a functional, technologically advanced, and aesthetically appealing outcome, involving citizens and stakeholders through a co-creation process could lead to solutions that reflect their collective knowledge, experiences, and desires. This participatory approach fosters greater stakeholder identification with the outcomes, resulting in more positive perceptions and stronger community support.

The two case studies below - Smart Kalasatama in Finland and Espaço Cidadão Energia in Portugal - illustrate how Design Thinking can empower communities and enhance democratic engagement in urban development and public initiatives.

### **Smart Kalasatama**

The Smart Kalasatama project in Helsinki exemplifies how Design Thinking, combined with digitalisation, can drive urban innovation through community-led experimentation. Launched in 2013, this initiative transformed the former port area of Kalasatama into a “living lab” for smart urban solutions (Kaisa Spilling, Bergström & Kubo Creative Agency, 2021). Agile pilot programmes were implemented to enable start-ups and small enterprises to test early-stage solutions directly with residents. The project’s primary goals included simplifying residents’ daily lives, improving environmental sustainability, and optimising urban infrastructure. Key initiatives focused on sustainable energy use, smart mobility systems, and citizen-government interaction facilitated through digital platforms. These platforms empowered residents to voice their opinions, participate in decision-making, and co-create new services. This participatory governance model promotes transparency and fosters a stronger connection between citizens and public policies. By giving residents a central role in shaping their neighbourhood, the project has cultivated a sense of ownership and engagement, creating a more connected and resilient community.

### **Espaço Cidadão Energia (ECE)**

The Espaço Cidadão Energia (Energy Citizen Space) project emerged from Portugal’s Recovery and Resilience Plan as a means of empowering citizens to adopt sustainable energy practices. Aimed particularly at vulnerable populations, the initiative sought to establish local support structures to promote energy efficiency, renewable energy adoption, and sustainable behaviours. ADENE, Portugal’s energy agency, led the project, collaborating with a Design Thinking consultancy to design and facilitate an intensive four-month co-creation process (Mindshake, 2024). This process brought together a diverse range of stakeholders, including local authorities, social enterprises, civil society members, and researchers, to develop a functional model for Citizen Energy Spaces. A key outcome of this process was the emphasis on collaboration and ownership. Stakeholder involvement fostered a sense of shared responsibility, with participants feeling personally invested in the project’s success. Dialogue sessions ensured that the solutions developed were inclusive and aligned with the needs of all involved. Looking ahead, this spirit of co-responsibility will be critical to the implementation of these Citizen Energy Spaces, planned for 2025.

By continuing to engage local stakeholders, the initiative can adapt to evolving community realities, ensuring long-term impact and relevance.

### **Closing Thoughts and Future Perspective**

Through these case studies, it becomes clear how Design Thinking strengthens democratic processes by fostering inclusivity, participation, and solutions that genuinely address people's needs. Standing at the crossroads of innovation and governance, Design Thinking beckons us to imagine a world where democracy is not merely a structure, but a shared endeavour—transdisciplinary, collaborative, experimental and profoundly human. By bridging representative efficiency and participatory inclusiveness, DT underscores its adaptability across democratic models. Where traditional approaches often see barriers, Design Thinking sees possibilities. Where governance may falter in engaging its citizens, Design Thinking finds its strength.

As we move forward, the integration of AI into Design Thinking—marking the era of Design Thinking 3.0—offers transformative opportunities for innovation and democratic engagement. AI technologies, such as machine learning, generative algorithms, and natural language processing, can enhance the Design Thinking process by producing diverse ideas, analysing data to uncover user insights, and visualising complex systems. Additionally, AI-driven simulations enable faster prototyping and testing, improving decision-making through predictive analytics and data-driven insights.

Nevertheless, integrating AI raises critical questions regarding its implications for democracy. While AI has the potential to democratise access to tools and knowledge, it may also reinforce existing inequalities if poorly implemented. Over-reliance on algorithms could marginalise underrepresented voices, particularly if datasets fail to capture their experiences. Moreover, the perceived objectivity of AI risks undermining the human-centred values at the core of Design Thinking, such as empathy and inclusive dialogue. To ensure AI complements rather than compromises democratic principles, designers and policymakers must prioritise transparency, address biases in data and algorithms, and uphold ethical standards. AI should enhance creativity and inclusivity without shifting the focus of Design Thinking from human-centred to efficiency-driven outcomes.

Looking ahead, Design Thinking will likely play an increasingly vital role in addressing complex global challenges, with AI serving as a critical enabler. By thoughtfully integrating AI, Design Thinking can bring together diverse perspectives, fostering collaboration on issues such as climate change, social inequality, and technological disruption. However, its continued success will depend on preserving its core principles of empathy, inclusivity, experimentation and co-creation. In this emerging landscape, the challenge lies in ensuring that AI-enhanced Design Thinking empowers communities and prioritises democratic values. By blending human creativity with technological innovation, it has the potential to tackle 21st-century challenges while shaping a future that reflects collective aspirations.

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# Design for People and Planet.

## The democratization of material culture for the common good

..... **Stuart Walker**

The contemporary world is moving ever closer to being run, not by democracies, but by oligarchical technocracies with leanings toward authoritarianism. In the pursuit of power and profits, national borders and democratic principles are ignored, undermined or overridden or, when these principles serve private-sector interests, selectively shored up.

Multinationals have a larger market value than many nation-states: Apple is worth more than twice the GDP of Mexico; Alphabet more than one and a half times that of Russia; and Microsoft as much as Italy<sup>1</sup>. These and many other organizations wield enormous power and influence, but they are run by self-appointed leaders who often demonstrate disdain for democracy. Their governing tenets are not democratic principles but profits and growth, which in the ruthless competitive atmosphere that dominates the boardroom are pursued with little regard for the human, societal, and environmental costs. And consequently, workers and consumers, as well as the earth itself, are being pitilessly exploited.

Those employed in the extraction industries, as well as factory workers, packers, and warehouse employees have been losing ground for many years. Typically, they work long hours for little pay, with few or no benefits, and even zero-hour contracts. Such conditions have created an identifiable sector of society known as the working poor. Employment conditions have been steadily declining for years because too often unions are banned, and those who speak up are dismissed or worse. The gains that followed WWII, in the form of employee rights and benefits, the ability to strike for better conditions, and access to sick pay and holiday pay, have been systematically stripped away to bolster profits and

<sup>1</sup> Companies that are worth more than countries. 2025, *Real Business Rescue*, Begbies Traynor, Manchester, UK, [www.realbusinessrescue.co.uk/advice-hub/companies-worth-more-than-countries](http://www.realbusinessrescue.co.uk/advice-hub/companies-worth-more-than-countries)

shareholder dividends. Unsurprisingly, corporate executives and company owners have become extraordinarily wealthy as the working- and middle-classes have become steadily poorer.

Consumers, too, are exploited. What we buy, what we use, how we use things, and how long they last are being decided by the few, designed by the few, produced by the few, and controlled by the few. And so, we are all being subjected to overpriced, irreparable products that are deliberately designed to fail. In addition, we are being continuously manipulated by an unceasing barrage of targeted advertising that tells us we should want more, we deserve more, we should expect more. As a result, no matter how much we have, we are made to feel dissatisfied, inadequate, and resentful towards others.

With the help of ongoing techno-scientific advancements, this abusive and manipulative system produces an endless stream of increasingly sophisticated consumer products without any consideration of 'enough'. Sufficiency is reviled by consumer capitalism.

Needless to say, the environmental consequences, especially since the 1970s, have been devastating, with precipitous declines in wildlife populations, the eradication of migration routes and habitats, and steadily increasing emissions and global temperatures. Devastatingly severe weather events and hazardous climatic conditions are now common, causing floods, fires, and crop failures; and vast swathes of land, especially in the southern hemisphere, are becoming uninhabitable.

The age of excessive consumption, self-indulgence, and so much waste has become the norm for many living in the Anglo-Euro nations and other wealthy regions of the world. This period in human history, which has been dubbed 'The Great Acceleration', is characterized by extraordinary growth in production and markets, and the globalization of consumer lifestyles. It is spurred on by an ideology that combines a dog-eat-dog competitive individualism with unabashed hedonism. Corporations survive and thrive through the sheer brute force of economic superiority – it is the law of the jungle, with no place for care and compassion.

All this would have been anathema to my grandparents' generation, and it is fundamentally *undemocratic* because it thrives on division and inequality. Its preoccupation with change, innovation and a culture of 'always new' is deeply unjust: *directly* through its socially exploitative methods, and *indirectly* through its deleterious effects on living conditions caused by its environmental repercussions. Therefore, a truly democratic approach to design would have to be driven by entirely different values.

In its many forms, contemporary design is complicit in creating and maintaining this culture of ruination. Through its visualizations of perfection, its artfully seductive advertising imagery, and its highly imaginative psychological manipulations, design plays an instrumental role in fermenting envy, vanity and the aesthetics of avarice. This being

the case, can we really talk of *design and democracy*? Is design inherently antithetical to democratic principles? Or can design be fruitfully combined with democracy to serve the common good? If so, what might such a combination mean? What *should* such a combination mean?

Abraham Lincoln famously described democracy as government of the people, by the people, for the people. It is a form of government in which all the inhabitants of a country or region are involved in making decisions about its own affairs, usually through elected representatives. It strives to ensure that everyone in society has equal rights, everyone is treated with tolerance and respect, and principles of fairness and equal treatment are upheld in the country's institutions and organizations.

These are difficult ideals to put into practice in the best of times, and most democratic governments would admit to falling short, but today the dominant culture in which design operates is, in many ways, actively working *against* these ideals. Consequently, if the notion of *design and democracy* is to have any purchase, design will have to adhere to fundamentally different values, principles and priorities. So let us consider what such a shift implies.

Global corporations involved in large-scale manufacturing of consumer products use all kinds of design specialisms, including product design, interaction design, graphics, service design and marketing design. Rather than being democratic, the ruling structures of these corporations are more akin to governance of the people by the few, for the few. The transcontinental character of modern multinationals not only provides them with unprecedented reach and influence, but also allows them to ride roughshod over nationally administered tax regimes. And contemporary design in all its forms is fully integrated throughout these powerful organizations.

One could argue that large-scale mass production is, in principle, democratic because it makes more products more affordable for more people. But it is an argument that fails to stand up to scrutiny. Not only does it reduce notions of equality and equity to simply owning more possessions but, rather than distributing wealth fairly, it also tends to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of those at the top. To achieve social equality, the constitution of the European Union recognizes two important, interconnected principles. The first, solidarity, acknowledges that we are all part of a larger community and as such we have common interests, and therefore obligations that involve various joint responsibilities and rights. The second, subsidiarity, is the principle that “a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level.”<sup>2</sup> This second principle helps ensure a proportional approach to centralized decision-making by accepting that many decisions are best made at a more regional or local level.

2 Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 2025, online edition)

These principles can also be applied in the governance of the design and production of goods for everyday life. This is precisely what the concept of *design and democracy* should aspire to, because a move away from mega-sized, multinational corporations towards greater regionalization and localization in decision-making and distribution of the rewards of manufacturing, has the potential for very significant social and environmental benefits.

By being more attuned to local needs, decision-making can be made more sensitively, giving rise to place-specific training and employment opportunities. In turn, this helps develop a more distributed, variegated and diversified economy, which is far more robust than the monocultures created by large corporations. In terms of design, products can be designed and produced in ways that are suited more particularly to local cultural and environmental conditions. As a result, design would help reflect and support local identity, community and cultural cohesion.

Localization of employment and production also reduces transportation needs, with less commuting and less need for the packaging and shipping of goods. In addition, greater emphasis on localization of production and assembly enables opportunities for product repair and refurbishment. All these things help increase product longevity and reduce waste, and thus lessen the need for virgin resources. In the process, habitats are saved, emissions are cut, and nature benefits.

Far greater emphasis on localization would undoubtedly have very significant social and environmental benefits and, in compliance with the principle of subsidiarity, decision-making would be made "at a more immediate or local level". However, it is neither feasible nor desirable to try to do everything at the local level. Therefore, for efficiency and compatibility across regions, and in compliance with the principle of solidarity, some aspects of decision-making and production are best achieved more centrally. These can then be distributed to regionalized and localized production streams for incorporation into design decisions and products.

Therefore, to achieve 'design and democracy', the challenge is to find an appropriate balance and proportionality between centralized and localized decision-making. This is necessarily a dynamic, constantly changing negotiation but, pursued with the right intentions, design can simultaneously bring great benefits to people and planet and can affirm and reify democratic principles at the heart of the common good.

# Against Polarization. Being aware of interdependences in a quasi-war economy

..... **Francesco Zurlo**

In March 2022, Mario Draghi, still Italian Prime Minister at the time, stated that we were not yet in a “war economy.”<sup>1</sup> The president denied it, but actually evoked it at the same time.

This quasi-war “economy” has not happened for over 70 years. And the data does not seem to compromise this: in 2023, global military spending, rose almost 10% to a record figure of 2.2 trillion euros. The IISS (International Institute for Strategic Studies) predicts further growth for 2024. In Italy, in the last 10 years, military spending increased by 30% while education by just 3%.<sup>2</sup> If the economy is taking-on this connotation, what is the role of design (and of those who should educate future designers)? Let’s make a point: designers do not design weapons. It would be an deontological paradox. When we take the definitions of design, for example, those given by the WDO<sup>3</sup>, we speak of design as an activity aimed at transforming raw technologies into artefacts that are functional for improving the quality of life.

A weapon, of whatever kind, does not improve the quality of life. It suppresses it.

But this is not the only issue. Technologies, in fact, are not neutral but have potential negative uses in themselves. The European Commission has presented a Delegated Regulation (2023/66, which came into force on 12 January 2023) in which it has updated the list of Dual Use products, i.e. goods - such as software and technologies - that although designed for civil use can be diverted and used in the military sphere such as, for example, sensors and lasers, machinery, calculators, various materials with high technological content.

1 <https://www.agi.it/politica/news/2022-03-11/draghi-non-e-economia-di-guerra-ma-prepariamoci-15963390/>

2 <https://www.greenpeace.org/static/planet4-italy-stateless/2023/11/d4d111bc-arming-europe.pdf>

3 <https://wdo.org/about/definition/industrial-design-definition-history/> : “The function of an industrial designer is to give such form to objects and services that they render the conduct of human life efficient and satisfying.”

Designers should therefore not only not design weapons but should also imagine the misuse of these technologies for purposes other than those for which they were created.

Indeed, the knowledge of the regulation is not enough. In an article of a decade ago, *The Economist*<sup>4</sup> spoke of the explosion of technologies (MEMS, microprocessors, actuators, sensors) as in the Cambrian biological period, over 540 million years ago, when there was an explosion of living forms in the oceans (partly contradicting the Darwinian lesson of the evolution of species). This explosion stimulates the emergence of new start-ups that combine these technological 'Legos' to find new epiphanies, respond to unexpressed needs and create new markets. Technologies, especially the digital ones, can enable unthinkable things: with a 3D printer, for instance, you can make a low-cost prosthesis for the wounded in the Ukraine war<sup>5</sup> or make a rudimentary weapon.<sup>6</sup> This is the *raison-why* to emphasize a specific capability of designers: the *critical anticipation*<sup>7</sup> of what is to come. The term has in it, on the one hand, the inherent capacity of design to pick up on weak signals and anticipate possible futures, and on the other, the ability to critically read phenomena in order to understand their scope and possible misuses.

The critical dimension also supports a change of perspective in project culture. Arturo Escobar, the well-known American-Colombian anthropologist, argues for an *ontologic turn* for design: no more an anthropocentric and object-centred attitude but a life-centred dimension, putting at the center of every human act (and design) *relationality*. Relationality is the keyword of this ontological leap that is evident when design becomes aware of the "radical interdependencies" that are present on Earth, "not a collection of objects, but a communion of subjects"- a comingling of non-separable entities (including objects) - as ecologist and theologian Thomas Berry powerfully put it".<sup>8</sup>

4 Siegel L., A Cambrian Moment, in "The Economist", Jan 18th 2014

5 Letizia, low cost 3D printed prosthesis, by IsinnovaLab, Italy

6 In 2012 in the USA, Cody Wilson offered, for the first time, an open source solution for the design of firearms made by 3D printers.

7 F.Zurlo, Design Strategico, in AAVV, XXI secolo (Roma: Enciclopedia Treccani, 2010)

8 T. Berry, "The Determining Features of the Ecozoic Era," in T. Berry, Selected Writing on the Earth Community, 142-44 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014) quoted in A.Escobar, M.Osterweil, K.Sharma, Relationality. An Emergent Politics of Life Beyond the Human, p. 156 (NY: Bloomsbury, 2024),

What has been the most evident manifestation of this interdependence? We had proof of it in the devastating speed with which the COVID-19 pandemic spread. And we also had examples of incredible solidarity. During the lockdown, it was as if the hope for a pacified world had been ignited. A common, invisible enemy, the virus, that put us all together trying to overcome divisions, conflicts, diversity. It seems that that vision of alliance was a dream. The first bombs on Kiev, on a cold winter's day of February 2022, as well as the massacre of defenseless civilians on 7<sup>th</sup> October by Hamas terrorists and the abnormal reaction of Benjamin Netanyahu's government with the massacre of civilians in Gaza (over 35,000 dead as of July 2024), brought us back to reality, forgetting in an instant that dimension of interconnection we had all experienced during the long months of the pandemic.

The explosion of this violence, in different parts of the planet, calls for the effort - enabled also by visionaries and creatives - to identify new worldmaking narratives and, among these, the most promising is precisely the one that highlights the importance of the dimension of interdependence: all living beings, whether human or non-human, are connected to each other and each depends on systems of relationships - organic and not - that enable life. Relationships with others, often have an ambivalent character: they can often be occasions for conflict, especially towards those we consider to be distant from us.

The key word to be considered here is *awareness*, for understanding and recognising the conflictuality of our bonds, with a corollary, however, that is to recognize "vulnerability," which unites all of us (the memory of COVID-19 should remind us of this). Opening up to this awareness means building a form of cosmopolitanism, being a citizen of the world, thus open to diversity and caring for the world. A "daily cosmopolitanism" that captures in the minutiae of everyday life opportunities to reflect on relationships and on the most significant element of it: care. Indeed, it is precisely the growth of this awareness of bonds and care that can increase the sense of community, that can enhance relationships, that can somehow avoid conflict.

The goal of designers is to highlight interdependence between people and people, different ethnic groups, people and things, things and things, people and nature, among common goods, in value chains, food production cycles and so on. Also, the interdependence between all of us and the generations to come.

In a recent exhibition (April 16<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup> Fabbrica del Vapore, Milan) the School of Design of Politecnico di Milano explored the idea of Interdependence, inviting almost 50 International Schools to propose projects related to the concept of Interdependence. We proposed the following 8 clusters to cover the diverse expression of relationality and interdependence<sup>9</sup>:

9 <https://www.interdependence.polimi.it/catalogue.html>

**ECOLOGICAL AND NATURAL RESOURCE INTERDEPENDENCE:** the interconnected relationship within ecosystems emphasizes the balance between different lifeforms, climate, and the environment, and the dependency of communities on natural resources. Design takes part in challenges of managing these resources sustainably, maintaining biodiversity and addressing issues of scarcity, equitable distribution, and the impact of human activities.

**ECONOMIC AND SUPPLY CHAIN INTERDEPENDENCE:** businesses, industries, and nations rely on each other economically, forming a global network of trade and financial interconnections. Design cannot ignore the intricate supply chains of industries, the global networks that connect different stakeholders, including producers, distributors, and final users.

**CULTURAL AND INFORMATION INTERDEPENDENCE:** cultures interact and influence each other, shaping values, traditions, and perspectives on a global scale. Information, data, and knowledge flow across media platforms so to influence public opinion and educational systems. Design is a fundamental aspect of communication and serves as a definite catalyst for collaboration and sharing.

**TECHNOLOGICAL INTERDEPENDENCE:** technological systems are intrinsically interconnected so that advancements in one area impact others and shape the overall technological landscape. Design is a way to humanize technology and make it meaningful, but also to tackle the ethical questions connected to technological developments.

**POLITICAL AND SOCIAL INTERDEPENDENCE:** nations and political entities depend on each other for security, cooperation, and addressing global challenges, such as conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and international diplomacy. Design has proven to have a voice in creating the context of dialogue, aiming to prevent or alleviate situations of conflict and emergencies.

**PEOPLE WELLBEING AND INTERDEPENDENCE:** the interdependence within personal relationships, the strong and weak ties that connect people, the exchange between generations shape societal structures and the way in which cultural values are transmitted and evolve over time. Design is an agent of interactions and tackles the very nature of relationships between people, influencing wellbeing and health.

**INTERDEPENDENCE of COMMONS:** common resources belong to and affect the whole of a community. Public space, shared assets, water, air and energy, common infrastructures and values are deeply interdependent. Design has proven to have a role in shaping commons and the way people can access it in a shared, participatory, and fair way.

FOOD RESOURCE INTERDEPENDENCE: global agricultural systems are interconnected and deeply affect global sustainability and wellbeing. Design already entered the food system in its different phases, aspects, and issues, so to be today one of the agents that can shape our food habits and industry.

Today, with the emergency of a global quasi-war, we are seeing a total blindness to this dimension of interdependence. And the lack of awareness leads, inevitably, to polarisation. And polarisation undermines the foundations of democratic debate and undermines peace<sup>10</sup>. Quoting and updating the work of Hanna Arendt<sup>11</sup>, design more and more today, in every situation, should provide contexts where conversations oriented towards action for the common interest can take place. Making this common interest accessible to all, to empower people and not just a small elite as often happens. And to act, even in small ways, in everyday life, with ideas like co-housings, collaborative living, local food production, urban mobility, proximity,<sup>12</sup> as examples of a *design hope*, as Tomàs Maldonado would have said<sup>13</sup>.

Examples as expressions of sensitivity towards the challenges that this Economy of Quasi-War poses to us.

10 L. Huybrechts, O. Devisch and V. Tassinari, Re-Framing the Politics of Design (Joeri De Bruyn, Public Space, 2022)

11 V. Tassinari and E. Staszowski, Designing in Dark Times, (London: Bloomsbury, 2020)

12 E. Manzini, Politics of the Everyday (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); Design when Everybody Designs (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

13 T. Maldonado, Design, Nature, and Revolution: Toward a Critical Ecology, trans. Mario Domandi, (NY: Harper & Row, 1972)



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