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# From Design Culture to Design Activism

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**ABSTRACT** Design culture has emerged as a broadly applied term in the past decade. Analytically, we can take it to describe the networking of the domains of design, production, and consumption within which questions of value, circulation, and practice reside. The reflexive promotion of design cultures and the enrollment of subjects and objects into its cause are taken to be of particular importance within neoliberalism. Since design cultures are networks, issues of their density and scale and the speed and strength of their interactions are of interest. Design activism has emerged as a movement, partly in response to the recent crises of neoliberalism. However, it is not necessarily independent of mainstream design culture. Instead, it picks up and runs with some of its key themes, including intensification, co-articulation, temporality, and territorialization.

**KEYWORDS:** neoliberalism, relationality, value, ethical surplus, appropriation

*Saturday January 28, 2012. I am walking through Clerkenwell, London, where the UK's most intensive concentration of design and media firms is to be found. Celebrated for its accompanying trendy bars and cafes, small art galleries, and loft-living, this once marginal area of the capital now provides a blueprint for other creative quarters that have sprung up in the UK's towns and cities. My first destination is a meeting of the Design History Society at the Women's Library, University of East London. Here I report on the Design Activism and Social Change conference we held. Much comment is made on the surge of historical interest in the radical design movements of the 1970s. I then head further eastwards to Bethnal Green – another zone of gradual gentrification. I join the inaugural UK meeting of Occupy Design. Called together at short notice through social media, students, academics, and junior designers huddle in a chilly warehouse. The workshop is in full swing as design activists discuss what Occupy Design can do in response to the social injustices that the economic crisis has exposed. The next time I am in Bethnal Green will be to hear a talk about how social design and design activism can help with public-sector service delivery. It feels like early days, still.*

The debt crises in Europe, the foreclosures and unemployment in the US, bailouts of banks, the dramatic rise of commodity prices, climate change getting faster than predicted, the Arab Spring, Iraq and Afghanistan, massive migration piling pressure on urban infrastructures, the drug cartels in northern Mexico – they all produce a sense of a world in turmoil. And yet the structures and processes of neoliberalism that have come to dominate the majority of our planet through the last thirty years seem to rumble on. The culture of mainstream commercial design has developed through this period to support and promote neoliberalism. However, in more recent years design activism has emerged as a movement that contests it and searches for alternative models of practice. How do mainstream design culture and design activism exist side-by-side, however uncomfortably? Despite their different registers, what might they have in common?

The title of this article implies, in the words “from” and “to,” that design culture and design activism occupy separate timeframes and that they are placed in sequence. Certainly one of my aims is to argue that these concepts can be viewed historically. Briefly, for now, I take a period of “(high) design culture” to coincide with the dominant epoch of neoliberalism, dating roughly from 1980 to 2008. While one might naturally refer to the design culture of other historical periods, these particular years have produced a specific set of qualities in its operation that include an increased intensification of the dynamics between design production and consumption and that

I elaborate on further below. This neoliberalism/design culture period is bookended by two phases where more self-consciously radical possibilities for design arise, one of these coming in the 1970s with the second emerging from about 2005. This doesn't mean to say that one predates or postdates the other. Rather, I am describing a kind of "shadow period" that has existed during the formation of neoliberalism as a central tenet of political economy in the 1970s and, equally, during its crisis since 2008 where important design activist practices have also emerged.

Just as neoliberalism as the dominant economic mode of Western capitalism was very much under development from the early 1970s (when some of the most radical design thinking was also taking shape), so much of what we might understand as contemporary design activism has developed within and from the recent contexts of neoliberalism. The chief focus of this article takes into account these historical periods but, moreover, is concerned with the relationships between these concepts – their "to-ing" and "fro-ing."

Neoliberalism itself is a relatively recent term. The idea of economic practice distinct from classical liberalism can be traced back to the 1920s. It isn't until the 1970s that it gained traction in state policy. As a term in common usage, however, it has only circulated widely in the last decade (Peck et al. 2009). Put most bluntly and briefly, neoliberalism is typified by the following features:

- the deregulation of markets and the privileging of market forces, free of state intervention;
- the privatization of state-owned enterprises;
- the foregrounding of financial interests over others (e.g. communitarian, civic, social, environmental, etc.);
- an emphasis on competitiveness and on individual, entrepreneurial practices.

By extension, therefore, the relationship of design culture and design activism to neoliberalism must be understood. This means attempting to grasp how design works within, and takes advantage of, neoliberalism's structures, institutions, and resources. As such, pinpointing design's ideological and economic features and activities in this system comes to the fore.

Academic study in design, to date, has been remarkably devoid of considerations of political economy, particularly in terms of its theorization. One exception is Heskett (2008), who provides a generalistic survey of economic theories, design, and value creation. Another is Bryson and Rusten (2011), who focus on firms, individuals, and national policies in producing competitive advantage through design. Their aims, though, are not to provide a politicized view. The social and economic structures within and for which design functions and its relationship to the workings of power and capital are accepted as standard. Conversely, Fry (2010) develops a strident critique of

politics and unsustainability from a design point of view; but he does not elaborate on how the economies act to produce unsustainability or how his proposals impact economic practices and political economy in a broader sense.

The point here is not to berate past authors but to establish that this article is written in an ill-defined and underdeveloped field. However, other fields can be drawn from. Needless to say, then, the work of Latour (e.g. 2005) and colleagues in actor-network theory (ANT) and science and technology studies (STS) has helped me consolidate a concept of design culture. Their understanding of social practices involving the networking of human and non-human actors is a useful starting point and has also been developed in relation to design by Fallan (2008), Yaneva (2009), Kimbell (2011, 2012), and Wilkie (2011). However, Hall's more nuanced discussion of "articulations" (1985) is also useful to developing a theoretical analysis of design culture. Recent work that develops the related notion of "practice theory" (e.g. Shove et al. 2012) usefully draws design more into this frame of STS and ANT. That said, I think there is still somewhere to go within this thinking with regards to considering the qualities and aesthetic experience of design things.

In recent years there has been a turn in sociology to the economic, itself partly stemming from actor-network theory. This is useful in bridging these slippery concepts of design culture and neoliberalism. Georg Simmel's 1907 text, *The Philosophy of Money*, has been reconsidered, particularly in the context of his discussions of value. Simmel drew attention to value's relational aspect – that it depends on understandings and interactions between actors (Canto Milà 2005). A design culture also involves enrollment into shared sets of understandings, knowledge, and outlooks that also engender value and its circulation. Studies of the stock market and financialization that draw on ANT are also useful (e.g. Knorr Cetina and Bruegger 2000; Mackenzie 2009) in highlighting the contingencies of people and objects within a system. Finally, a revindication of the notion of territory in human geography helps to (literally) ground considerations of design culture, design activism, and neoliberalism (e.g. Massey 2004; Painter 2010). This paper picks up on the lacuna of studies in design and political economy, and through drawing on some of the insights that have come from ANT and recent economic sociology, develops some themes that might also help us understand the relationships of design culture and design activism.

There is an asymmetry here. The term "design culture" suggests a state of being – something that is the result of actions. "Design activism" implies intention – an enthusiasm to act on a situation. Elsewhere (Julier 2006), I have distinguished between "Design Culture" (upper case) and "design culture" (lower case). The former was proposed as an academic field of inquiry to explore the relationships of contemporary design practice, production,

and consumption. The latter usage, which this article foregrounds, still embraces these three considerations but is a descriptive term used in a variety of contexts, from the design studio to localities to the nation, but also in different scales of commercial design practice. Design cultures are made up of active agents, but their concatenation itself also has agency, albeit that this agency is often less explicitly declared. Thus, a design culture is largely produced through circumstances. It is reactive. Design activism is a movement that is more self-consciously and more knowingly responsive to circumstances. It is politicized.

“Design activism” is a relatively recent term. As we shall see, in the context of this article, my chief focus is on activist design, work that functions both in a utilitarian and a politicizing sense. This contrasts with activities and artifacts, such as writing manifestos or designing political posters, whose sole purpose is changing attitudes. Rather, I take design activism to include the development of new processes and artifacts, where their starting points are overtly social, environmental, and/or political issues, but where they also intervene functionally in these. Designers, professional and otherwise, curators, critics, and historians are still experimenting with alternative modes of practice and representation to the dominant narrative of design culture. Indeed, to return to the question of periodization, design activism in its various forms is arguably the first recognizably international movement in design since the radical design era of the 1970s. What came between as recognizable groupings – such as post-punk graphics – were stylistic tendencies.

This article begins by examining the relationships of design culture and neoliberalism. I firstly account for the rise of design culture within the processes of neoliberalism that privilege deregulation, marketization, privatization, and financialization. In particular, I am interested in how neoliberalism, and design culture, relies on systems of relationality while also constantly being future-orientated. As part of this, design culture draws on, leverages, or appropriates what exists on its edges – a tactic that is more general to neoliberalism as well. I then argue that, while the rise of design activism legitimately contests this, this is not to say that it will replace design culture wholesale. Nor will neoliberalism give way to a postneoliberal world. The flexibility of neoliberalism and design culture ensures their predominance. Nonetheless, neoliberalism and design culture themselves contain strategies and features that are open to (re)appropriation by design activism. Thus, ultimately, while this article focuses more on the traffic from design culture to design activism, there may also be an emergent dependency between the two.

The examples I draw on are illustrative and certainly not exhaustive. My primary geopolitical focus is on European and North American conceptions and practices. Further study, particularly outside these, may contest, modify, or provide alternative accounts to my claims.

## Design Culture and Neoliberalism

Harvey (2005) points out that it is more accurate to see neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices,” rather than a complete political ideology. Indeed, neoliberalism has been deployed across a range of political frameworks (witness, for example, its vigorous application within Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile from 1973). Thus, neoliberalism is slippery. Indeed, just as designers “dodge and weave” to find new marketplaces for their skills, creating new needs and desires, so neoliberalism is constantly on the move, finding new territories and combinations. Neoliberalism, like design, is a process of change more than an endpoint.

So how, despite this sense of constant dynamic and change, are design culture and neoliberalism aligned?

To start with, we might understand the rise of design over the last thirty years as one of the fruits of neoliberalism. Deregulation of markets and the running down of state controls ultimately lead to new consumer goods and their repackaging, new shopping malls and media products. Privatization of welfare provision leads to a range of service providers with logos, leaflets, and websites. The privileging of financial flows, including the stock market, makes for company annual reports and new product strategies to be designed. Intellectual property rights, including design patents, ensure corporate differentiation and dominance over markets. Individual and corporate entrepreneurialism rest on design and innovation – and therefore a “creative class” – to ensure this differentiation in the marketplace.

Design culture is thus both a product and description of the wider social and economic processes of this design turn within neoliberalism. A well-trodden explanation of this turn is that this is part of a shift from organized to disorganized capitalism, from Fordist to post-Fordist systems, and from classical liberalism to neoliberalism. This has resulted in the growth of the importance of cultural goods and the more refined management of the interface between producer and consumer (Offe 1985; Lash and Urry 1987, 1994). As more producers enter freely into markets, so they have to find more ways of differentiating themselves and attracting our attention. This leads to design’s role in the so-called “aestheticization of everyday life,” where greater attention is paid to the formal presentation of goods and services, both in their production and consumption (Featherstone 1991).

But let us drill a bit deeper into the qualities that design culture embraces. If we are to view the concept of design culture as including the relationalities between designers, producers, and consumers, then we should also analyze and question the strength, scale, speed, and density of the exchanges between them.

To identify a design culture is to highlight the “fit” between its constituent parts (Bell and Jayne 2003). This is dependent on an ease of interchange between production, consumption, and the

work of designers, as well as tacit or explicit understandings of how design objects function to carry value within, symbolize, facilitate, or guide interchanges (Julier 2006). The speed and frequency of interchanges between their elements work to legitimate and confer value on design cultures. By the same token, the neoliberal period has produced a voracious appetite for speed of delivery, coined with the new economy's mantra of "better, faster, cheaper." So, for example, products that rely on fast turnarounds between customer feedback, redesign, manufacture, and bringing to market (e.g. Zara or Benetton clothing) produce one kind of design culture. Here the apparent responsiveness to consumer demand on the part of designers and producers, or consumers' engagement with that brand, suggest a shared understanding as to their general qualities and ways of working.

Design cultures are also resolutely territorial. By this, I mean not just geographical, but also intellectual, territory. With regards to the former, for instance, the dense packing of designers, studios, design shops, and trendy restaurants to define "creative quarters" fulfills urban cultural strategies in signifying and promoting the presence of innovative knowledge economies for a global marketplace (e.g. Koskinen 2005; Vickery 2011). With regards to the latter, for example, intellectual property rights, design registrations, patents, or trademarks define and protect, through law, the commercial territory. These territories may therefore be distributed across a global market or concentrated into an urban regeneration strategy; they mark out a space through their intensification. Just as neoliberalism purportedly "frees up" the constraints of economic boundaries, so design cultures move to occupy and develop themselves at various scales within this.

Design cultures also include fixed assets, such as buildings, equipment, communication networks, or primary material resources, but these are also lashed together with human practices. These human practices might include "forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities ... a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (Reckwitz 2002: 249). The constellation of these human and non-human features may be described in order to territorialize a design culture.

The description of such articulations, or, indeed, *articulating* various assets, itself becomes a promotional trope. An articulation occurs when two things work together. This coming together is dependent on spatial and temporal circumstances – being in the right place at the right time – and therefore "is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time" (Hall 1996: 141; Featherstone 2011). Articulation is therefore seen as being dynamic in that it is subject to change and even ephemeral. It is also seen to be productive in that the coming together of elements makes for new understandings and practices. Therefore there is a



double meaning in this term “articulation,” for it expresses both linking and description. Design exhibitions or magazine articles devoted to national or local design often assemble purviews of their objects or spaces but also their policies, educational resources, consumer practices, and tastes. For example, the jacket blurb from the book accompanying the Victoria & Albert Museum’s 2012 exhibition on British design proclaims it as a “stunning record of Britain’s rich design culture” (Beward and Wood 2012). However, it is not just these representational devices that articulate and promote a design culture. The concept circulates and is enacted through the objects and people themselves. A design culture comes into being as it is performed and as its constituent parts come together.

More specifically to government policy and commercial concerns, the measurement and valorization of the design industry has also developed and confronted the problems of measuring and auditing it (Julier and Moor 2009). The latter has involved “mapping documents” that attempt to quantify numbers of designers, contribution to Gross Domestic Product, “value-added” properties in terms of extra employment or turnover created, and so on. But they also include the measurement of more material assets, such as the existence of design schools or cultural centers that make up the fixed infrastructures of design cultures (e.g. British Council 2007).

These surveys find parallel challenges in how design consultancies valorize their work for clients (Dorland 2009; Julier 2010). What do you charge your clients for creativity, particularly when you don’t know how successful an input will be? How do you calculate this against your fixed costs (e.g. office rental, materials, or equipment)? How much do you pay your enthusiastic, talented junior designers who put in many extra hours of work?

These quandaries exist for design, but reflect wider challenges of valorization in the neoliberal system. This is because this is not just an issue of articulating and quantifying material and immaterial assets. Branding and design are concerned with temporalities in that, like the finance and shares market, they relate to the future as a source of value (Lash and Lury in Julier 2009). It is also to do with the future orientation of creative work in particular and the neoliberal economy in general.

If the objects of design cultures include not only things, environments, visual communication, and digital platforms, but also knowledge, skill, information, and their carriers, both human and non-human, then these also move and change. Design cultures are therefore in a constant dynamic state. In order to further capture this temporal sense, it is perhaps worth thinking in terms of design culture as being continually engaged in producing future value. Design culture is future-directed, in an ongoing state of becoming, and its value is accounted for in terms of the relationship of input and output (Thrift 2008). Thus, it is stable in the way a design culture seeks elements of consensus in order to thrive and function, but also

dynamic in the way it is constituted to produce novel and destabilizing scenarios (Slater 2002).

This sense of *in potentia* resonates with the wider conditions of neoliberalism. If a key feature of the era of neoliberalism has been the privileging of its financial institutions – merchant banking, the stock exchange, the International Monetary Fund – then underlying this has been a constant search for sources of future value. Banks, pension funds, stockbrokers, and private investors look for places to put their money where it will reap the biggest returns, pitting the risk of failure against potential large returns. Likewise, much of design is configured to either signal or unlock future value. How much might be spent on it is calculated, again, against what it might provide in terms of such things as new customers, secure brand loyalty, repeat visits, or, particularly in the built environment, the rise of land values.

Brand valuation assesses the reputational assets of products or services by, for example, how well they are known, how are they thought of, what loyalty they command. By turning qualitative information into quantitative data, value is calculated (Lindemann 2010; Moor and Lury 2011). This exposes the fact that a brand's value is less dependent on the fixed resources of a corporation than on the enthusiasm of its customers. (Needless to say, this is why they ask us to "follow [them] on Facebook or Twitter.") Drawing from the work of Lazzarato (1997), Arvidsson (2005) calls this enthusiasm "ethical surplus." He argues that brands work to muster "leftover" interest among the public that might otherwise be applied elsewhere. Ethical surplus is to be found in the values of sharing and respect that do not necessarily exist at the core of economic practices. You can go to work and do the job without hanging out with your colleagues or being a "team-player." You can consume products without being interested in their brand characteristics or chatting with your friends about them. But these social practices enrich and augment the economic sphere. The value of a thing depends on leveraging interest outside itself.

We can pin this observation back into the workings of the design industry and design culture itself. Needless to say, designers are also implicated in devising strategies to engage enthusiasm and loyalty among consumers. Again, this is about potential value – how the work of consumers down the line can add to the product. Furthermore, and extending, feedback loops from consumers (e.g. through brand websites and social media), and even where they directly engage in production (e.g. through Open Source systems), contribute to this. Arvidsson (2008) identifies this as a part of the developing socialization of capital (people, and groups of people, are seen as a resource), which is mobilized through cultural practices.

And what of those hardworking (and playing?) junior designers? Does their sociality also function as capital? This is certainly how Angela McRobbie (2002) sees them: their value as workers is dependent on a long-hours culture, precarious employment patterns,

and a willingness to engage beyond the nine-to-five day in “network sociality” (e.g. going to bars, exhibition openings, and design events to widen and consolidate professional contacts). They lend their ethical surplus to the business of design. In their flexibility, creative workers have been mobilized as a vanguard of some of the labor conditions of neoliberalism.

Design’s heterogeneity, born of a lack of professional norms and a breadth of application and reception, sees to its flexibility. Just as neoliberalism strategically takes advantage of calamities and crises (Klein 2007), so new specialisms in design have continually emerged in response to them by dint of opportunism. Designers are adept at reinventing themselves for their clients by thinking through new ways of attracting their attention, accounting for their services. As cultural intermediaries, theirs is the work of “needs production” (Bourdieu 1984). Furthermore, they are able to re-scale their operations. Through the neoliberal period, designers have become progressively “lighter” in their operations. Freelancing has continued to dominate the industry; capital costs remain very low. This flexibility is matched by a resilience to withstand a long-hours culture as clients continue to drive down billings and expect designers to turn round more projects faster (British Design Innovation 2007).

Neoliberalism “operates amongst its others.” It “invariably exists in an essentially parasitical relationship with those extant social formations with which it has an antagonistic relationship” (Peck et al. 2009: 104). By this, Peck and colleagues were referring to neoliberalism as an ongoing process of transforming and restructuring (e.g. privatizing state welfare provision, lifting trade barriers, deregulating labor). This may be seen on a global scale in terms of its search for new territories to operate in (e.g. the Far East or Arab nations).

We might also see neoliberalism as a continual process of renewing (or, indeed, redesigning) itself. This is done by drawing its “others” into its own workings. Within this paradigm and with reference back to creative work and design culture, we can cite the classic appropriation of the marginality of cultural production into the mainstream or, otherwise, the marketization of the tortured artist, as so brilliantly described by Frith and Horne (1987). But this doesn’t always have to be the case ....

### **Design Activism, Neoliberalism, and Postneoliberalism**

What if designers have reached a tipping point? What if some creative workers are no longer willing to lend their “ethical surplus” out?

A recent in-depth inquiry into UK designers reveals profound dissatisfaction with working conditions in their industry. The Design Industry Voices 2011 report draws on a survey of 496 people working in design and digital media agencies and presents statistics to demonstrate that work in the design industry is not necessarily a happy place. Fewer opportunities for professional development, greater client expectations for less money, and more frequent use

of unpaid interns are reported. But the sentiment with regards to dissatisfaction is best summed up by the following observation from a design agency director:

Whereas before candidates might have been happy to work hard on pitches into the evening on the hope that they will be rewarded later down the line with a bonus or time off in lieu [they] are now rejecting companies who are known to work their staff hard unless they get assurances in writing that they will be rewarded in some way for their hard work. (Cited in Design Industry Voices 2011: 2)

It may seem odd that candidates for design jobs are taking such a strident line in what is broadly a recession-hit industry. In a small way, this example suggests a limited politicization of designers. It may be that the downturn for the creative industries in some parts of the world has provoked reconsideration, providing an opportunity for designers to take stock of their conditions and motivations.

Beyond a realization of the straightforward exploitation of their own “ethical surplus,” designers share a broader set of tumultuous political and economic circumstances in the West that may bring about politicization and a search for alternative models of everyday practice. These circumstances include the following:

- a superpower and its allies entrenched in protracted and expensive conflict far from its own territories;
- this conflict and previous state-expenditure commitments causing unprecedented high levels of national debt;
- economic recession leading to wage stagnation, particularly for the middle classes;
- the rapidly rising price of oil and other commodities causing high inflation and therefore a huge loss of expendable outcome;
- resulting political unrest that includes a turn away from party politics to issue-based concerns;
- a growing awareness of the connectivity of everyday concerns to global ones, particularly in relation to environmental issues.

All of these circumstances may also be cited within the early 1970s. And it is leading up to and through that period that a panoply of radical thinking in design emerged. It gave us the radical design of Italians – groups like Superstudio, Archizoom, and UFO, who theorized the idea of a possible network society where information systems would provide alternative structures for consumer culture. The early 1970s gave us “community architecture,” wherein end-users of planning and building would have an active role in specifying form, itself pre-figuring co-creation and participatory design. The year 1972 saw the publication of key seminal books that influenced design thinking, such as Victor Papanek’s *Design for the Real World*.

Permaculture, another invention of the early 1970s, developed design and planning models for low-energy-input food and sustainable food production. The appropriate technology movement also emerged in this era.

Whilst the 1970s and our contemporary period in the West share quite similar geopolitical features, our experience of and response to them will be distinct. The world is a different place. Rather, I want to make the somewhat obvious point that design activist impulses to develop new ways of working coincide with geopolitical, economic, and environmental crises.

To turn more to contemporary design activism, it is perhaps more precise to view it as a broad movement that partially overlaps with a range of practices, including social design, community design, participatory design, and critical design. As such, it ranges across all sectors of design and beyond to some practices in architecture, art, landscape architecture, and planning.

As one might expect, there is a time lag between design activism's actual happening and being brought into consciousness through its articulation. Recent publications have placed it variously in the frameworks of the production of artifacts within social movements, as a shift in the aims and methodologies of design, or as an iterative set of political contestations (Thorpe 2008; Fuad-Luke 2009; DiSalvo 2012). But here I wish to place the emphasis of design activism on its entanglements with the *realpolitik* of its actions. By this, my chief concern is not to produce further "wish lists" for design activists or report on experiments undertaken in the safety of the academic studio. Rather, I am drawing on observations of attempts to embed design activism into everyday life through its intervention with real people in real places. This is in part drawn from my own practice (see Julier 2011; Unsworth et al. 2011).

The pragmatic gesture of design activism that goes beyond manifestos or declarations is underlined by Markussen (2013: 38), who argues that, in design activism, "The design act is not a boycott, strike, protest, demonstration, or some other political act, but lends its power of resistance from being precisely a *designerly* way of intervening into people's lives" (2013: 38). As it involves the development of artifacts that exist in real time and space, it is situated within everyday contexts and processes of social and economic life. As intervention, it moves within the challenges of pre-existing circumstances, while also attempting to reorientate these. In this way, design activism also operates amongst its others. It exploits certain conditions of neoliberalism, to recycle and reprogram them.

Meanwhile, though, for many of the world's junior designers, their exploitation will continue, as will neoliberalism. One only has to look to the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) to see how neoliberalism and GDP growth continues apace. Where neoliberalism thrives, so will design cultures. But even for those countries in long-term recession or merely bumping along, combined with all

the other global challenges mentioned, a turn to a postneoliberal environment where power relations, the role of capital, and care for the environment are radically different is, I'm afraid to say, unlikely.

Neoliberalism is flexible. It is adept at exploiting crises. It is willing to reschedule and displace crises, for example, with the successive state bailouts of financial institutions. Even if, as an intellectual project, neoliberalism is dead, it may well be entering its “zombie period,” where it continues to function, its institutions and power still intact. A growth model of economics mostly still dominates, globally (Peck et al. 2009). However, as an aside, one must keep in view geopolitical contexts, such as parts of South America, that offer alternatives to neoliberal modes (see Kennedy and Tilly 2008; Escobar 2010).

Elsewhere, there may be more dovetailing between design culture and design activism. Design activism may invoke a postneoliberal way of doing political economy while also existing in a predominantly neoliberal framework. Neoliberalism is here to stay in some form or other. But as design culture, understood here as an expression of neoliberalism, is made up of an assemblage of mainstream and marginal practices, so design activism can interweave with and exploit the conditions of neoliberalism.

### **From Design Culture to Design Activism**

Design culture and design activism exist in relationship to one other. In this final section, I wish to pick up four themes that exist both within mainstream design culture and design activism. These have been placed into the earlier section on “Design Culture and Neoliberalism.” But here I want to be explicit in their usage. These are:

- intensification – which describes here a density of designerly intervention;
- co-articulation – which describes the marrying up of concerns or practices in a way that strengthens both;
- temporality – which describes the way that speed, slowness, or even open-endedness may be dealt with;
- territorialization – which describes the scale through which responsibility is conceived.

Neoliberalism includes the competition of monopolies. Competitiveness is not just between products or services for market share, but between brands, underpinned by intellectual property rights. Brands work through difference based on knowledge that is constructed relationally through multiple sites (Lury 2004). Each brand is singular in that while it may deliver a product that is relatively undifferentiated, in its performance (for example, petrol is just petrol), its way of operating, its way of interfacing with other clients or customers, its “instruction manuals,” if you like, are distinct from those competing brands. Thus, designers are frequently involved in the design

of “meta-data” (Sutton 2009). This means that they don’t necessarily always design the end-product; rather, codes or guidelines are created that are subsequently applied by someone else. More ordinarily, the corporate identity, brand, or franchise manual is what the designer develops, itself to be rolled out and implemented by others. Equally, one could argue that the designer is always working with individual artifacts (through, for example, prototypes, drawings, or specifications) that are subsequently serially reproduced. They are fashioning singularities. Commerce turns these singularities, or intensities, into extensities through their circulation (Lash 2010).

Intellectual property is therefore at the core of this, and it is here that those intensities are tightly defined and protected by law. For example, in 2012, Apple Inc. was awarded \$1 billion in damages against Samsung for a variety of patent infringements. Samsung’s response was summed up in their words, “It is unfortunate that patent law can be manipulated to give one company a monopoly over rectangles with rounded corners” (Samsung cited by Arthur 2012). This comments on the pursuit of the use of intellectual property rights to maintain monopoly through design patent. The case also illustrates ways by which design is mobilized and intensified in this process. And in doing so, the designer is involved in the engineering of affect (Thrift 2004).

This emphasis on the affective in design can be taken a few steps further so that the cognitive and embodied engagement with material becomes a way of transforming outlooks. Two examples of urban design activism illustrate this. Heads Together’s grassing over of a residential street in the city of Leeds in the UK was a tool to open up the imagination of neighborhood inhabitants and provoke a debate about what the street could be there for (Julier 2009). Similarly, Santiago Cirugeda’s placing of skips in the streets of Seville (Figure 1) and turning them into play objects questions and



**Figure 1**

Santiago Cirugeda, *Kuvas S.C.*, Seville 1997. Courtesy Santiago Cirugeda.

challenges ideas of public space and the street through their actual use (Markussen 2013).

It is therefore in this realm of affect that design activism picks up on and reuses mainstream design culture's tactic of **intensification**. Forms make political statements, but they also engage bodily dispositions and human emotions. The difference, however, is that this process in various forms of design culture seeks to engender enthusiasms and exploit ethical surplus for its own ends (for example, to maintain brand loyalty or a creative quarter). Leading on from Markussen (2013), within design activism, it is hoped that this intensification has a direct effect to produce new forms of cognition and practice and also politicizes.

The projects cited above slightly pre-date what I have identified as our current era of design activism. They feature attempts to disrupt the divisions between "above" and "below the line" design. They materially engage both end-users and policymakers at the same time through the affective domain. They are singularities, but ones whose ideas and applications may be rolled out further. They also try to create new relationships and marry interests by engaging existing, but untapped, interests, political concerns, everyday preoccupations, and ethical surplus. They seek a wider, systemic level of intervention than the mere delivery of discreet public services. Here, the design – its material outcome – gives focus to wider concerns that might be articulated in general, rhetorical terms: "I'm worried about the ways that private cars create pollution and global warming"; "There should be more possibilities for the community to meet"; and so on. But it also provides something through which these concerns can be acted on and thought through more.

This is where design works in a process of **co-articulation**. Here, objects function as a "materialization of participation" (Marres 2011: 516); they facilitate a performative engagement in public life without disembedding from the everyday. Users do not have to go "out there" to demonstrate their concerns. Instead, the (activist) object is something through which these concerns are looped within everyday practice. Again, within design culture, objects (such as the trendy bar in a creative quarter like Clerkenwell) can signify a creative quarter, but they are also enrolled into the functioning of that particular design culture, as are their users. Equally, using an iPhone enrolls you into the culture of Apple products. These are self-serving to their specific articulations. The design-activist object also enrolls, but toward ends outside itself, such as communitarian concerns for the environment. We have seen how the speed of exchange within design cultures works to valorize and legitimate them. This notion may include slow as well as fast and is also to be found in activist approaches. Examples include, here, *Città slow* or the Transition Towns movement (Parkins and Craig 2006; Hopkins 2008). However, we may also see **temporality** functioning in other ways.



In the two urban design activism examples cited, rather than seeing the lifetime of a project as being determined by client commission, through development to delivery, the activist is working in a more open-ended way that goes beyond the materialization of the design. Here, the designer works with and alongside the user and other interests. Implementation also involves a series of re-designs that doesn't necessarily mean that the design reaches an optimum point. Philosophically, of course, this has resonances with the notion of "wicked problems" (Rittel and Webber 1973). The designer remains embedded with their public and that responsibility becomes a shared one, and one that gives space for the designer to usefully contribute their expertise while engaging users in taking on and continuing to develop results.

The temporal regimes in mainstream design culture are not discreet or closed off. They do not necessarily seek resolution. In the first instance, this is implicit in the notion of "unfinished objects" that has been developed by Knorr Cetina (2001). Within design culture, the object is not singular. Rather, it exists in a variety of forms, either, for example, in the work of the designer as sketches, prototypes, and updates, or, more broadly, in the public sphere, for example as upgrades, repackagings, or a variety of media formats. In this way, it is subject to continual repositioning, heterogeneous modalities of encounter, different levels of learning, and so on. Furthermore, since we are describing complex networks of actors that are relationally configured and themselves in constant change, so the object is subject to constant transformations, either literally or in its meaning. The designer is working within this instability. The design activist is, too, but in order to redirect it.

Equally, we have seen how neoliberalism encourages the unlocking of future sources of value and how design cultures work within this. Likewise, a similar dynamic is at work in design activism. Much of the rhetoric in design and social innovation is directed at tapping into underused resources and freeing up their potential (Manzini and Jégou 2005; Unsworth et al. 2011). Thus, there is also a future orientation in design activism.

The overall ideological drive and language of neoliberalism is replete with aims toward the facilitation of the free global flow of capital and goods, the bringing down of barriers to this, and the speeding up of this movement. Neoliberalism mythologizes the idea of the world as a frictionless, unbounded space. In reality, neoliberalism is relentlessly territorialized. While capital has no sense of place, it is nonetheless moved from place to place, and, indeed, the places it is moved from or to is itself a territory that is marked out by material features and cultural practices (Escobar 2001; Mackenzie 2009).

Indeed, to step back from the global, financialist focus, one may regard, as Massey (2004) has, this territorializing as a "Russian doll effect" that starts at the home. The home provides the primary locus of financial calculations that is deeply entwined with the material.

It is in itself a design culture in that the edifice itself, and its decor and contents, as formulated by its actor-inhabitants, are value-producing. Decisions are made that reconcile available money, taste, and future value.

But this is just a starting point of a series of scales that neoliberalism and design cultures act on. Neighborhood planning and design guides, city master plans and economic strategies, national fiscal strategies, and pan-national trading agreements all establish bounded spaces where exchange takes place within and between these scales. Design may be mobilized to mark these boundaries and identities, for example through place-branding and iconic architecture. In policy and planning, the language of capital is loosely attached to design to underline and promote its value, as in, for instance, “cultural capital” or “creative clusters.” Design is framed both as an asset to a location and as part of the mechanisms that facilitate trade and the movement of capital between places. Thus, design culture functions in association with a variety of territorial scales.

Design activism may borrow from this “Russian doll effect” of **territorialization** to assert itself within these “geographies of responsibility,” albeit with a different sense of responsibility (Massey 2004). For example, Rosenberg (2011) shows how home improvement aligns a culture of design with neoliberal ideals of asset creation. To return full circle to the notion of co-articulation, the design activist might find ways to reframe this object-subject relationship in order to align the home with other concerns such as climate change (see Marres 2012). Equally, the Transition Towns movement (see [www.transitionnetwork.org](http://www.transitionnetwork.org)), with its focus on relocalization, looks to intensify the local systems of exchange, thereby consolidating neighborhoods, their cohesion, resilience, and responsiveness to climate change, and the challenges of a post-carbon economy.

## Conclusion

The scope of this article is wide. It engages with a process of neoliberalism that has been under development for forty years and ranges across much of the world. It attempts to elaborate on “design culture” – a broadly used term – and design activism, a movement that is still in emergence. This feels necessary as a contribution to a better conceptual understanding of design culture and design activism, however introductory my arguments are. Space hasn’t allowed for more in-depth discussion of the examples cited or expansion into or testing through others.

The contemporary crisis of neoliberalism does not signal a rupture and immediate shift to postneoliberalism. Parallels have been drawn with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (Peck et al. 2009). But the events of 1989 were largely unforeseen by those on the outside. A crisis of what became neoliberalism, by contrast, was calculated and foreseen even at its birth and then immediately before the financial

crisis of 2008 (e.g. Meadows et al. 1972, 2004). Just as neoliberalism engages continuous calculation of its quantitative and qualitative mechanisms and assets, so calculation has revealed its limits, greed, untruths, and violence (e.g. Dorling et al. 2008).

While design activism responds to such knowledge, it has also been spurred on by individuals and groups who want to work in different ways to mainstream commerce. This has necessarily taken them into engagement with neoliberal effects, for instance by working within and between the fragmented and privatized elements of public-sector delivery. Thus, design activism adopts and reuses many of the tropes to be found in mainstream design culture.

As a system of networks or articulations, design cultures are made up of constellations of human and non-human features. The density of these and the scales on which they work configure them. The speed and strength of their relationships also mark out their qualities. Design cultures *are*. They come about and have been formed within neoliberal frameworks. Design activism *acts on them*. It enters into the networks of design culture (and neoliberalism) and looks to produce other futures.

Neoliberalism and design culture are engaged in continual leveraging of assets outside themselves – theirs is the work of transformation. Likewise, design activism looks to mobilize underused assets, leverage enthusiasms, and generally look for future sources of value. This is done through persuasion but, crucially, through everyday practice as well. The objects of design culture and design activism are affective; designers provide intensifications that give materiality. Through this, they orientate life in various directions. It is up to us to decide which direction we wish to enroll in.

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