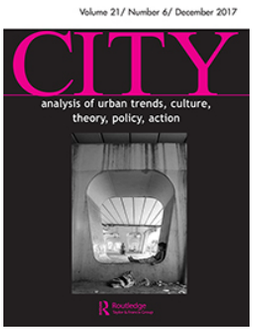

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Consultant social design, austerity and citizenry

Guy Julier

Social design has emerged as a broad set of designerly approaches to societal challenges. With falling public sector budgets and failing economies, social design, as carried through professional, consultant practices rather than in its voluntarist or activist modes, is understood to work as a smart, fast way of seeing us through these. Outsourcing, Outcome-Based Budgeting and the stirring up of traditional governance systems and responsibilities each contribute to a more varied and less permanent design landscape to work in, however. These are met by a set of design methods to researching, generating and realising new ways to configure and deliver services. This paper takes a critical view that asks whether consultant social design really is 'social' or whether, instead, it conspires, in its methods and in the contexts it is active in, towards the opposite.

Key words: design, austerity, citizenry, service delivery, social

Introduction

In recent years, a new visual idiom in design has begun to circulate through blogs, tweets and institutional reports. Rather than reified images of singularised design products, these representations are populated with photographs of design in action: walls of Post-It notes map customer journeys; matchboxes, Play-Doh and string, annotated with marker pens, model neighbourhoods; sketch notes on A1 sheets expose the networks of 'issues'; breakout groups of concerned citizens discuss their concerns while a rapporteur busily takes notes; role plays with civil servants and service-users are acted out.

This is the world of social design. The old world of design objects has not gone away. But another sensibility has emerged in promoting design for societal or collective benefits, aka social design. It operates predominantly, but not exclusively, across non-commercial sectors in a range of contexts, including development, regeneration and public sector service delivery.

Social design, in its broad terms, runs from starkly disobedient and disruptive design actions to professional consultancy that is deeply embedded within governmental policymaking. Professional consultancy work has emerged most noticeably since the early 2000s and has come about due to the coincidence of a number of factors. These include:

- government policies that ensure the weakening of state functions, particularly in welfare responsibilities through outsourcing of services to private companies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs);
- the overlapping of activist practices such as community action with professional modes of design consultancy;

- developments in design and management practices including customer experience and social entrepreneurship.

Thus, a professionalised form of 'consultant social design' within the wider umbrella term of 'social design' has emerged in this context. We may summarise social design in general as 'participatory approaches to researching, generating and realising new ways to make change happen towards collective and social ends, rather than predominantly commercial objectives' (Armstrong et al. 2014, 15). However, the *consultant* social design under discussion in this paper remains inextricably linked to mainstream commercial design's methods and notions of its publics.

Nonetheless, social design consultants carry out work almost exclusively for public sector bodies, NGOs or other agencies. Many of them have developed through service design, a specialism that looks to the form and configuration of the multiple artefacts and human interactions that constitute a service such as checking in at an airport or hiring a car. This looks beyond the singularised object of design to map the user-journey through a service that is made up of a series of encounters. It is where this material culture of the design processes that maps this journey—the Post-Its and Play-Doh—kicks in. It may be employed to understand how a service currently exists or for prototyping future possibilities. In either case, it pays attention to the human, material, spatial and temporal relationships of a system or service. In other words, it is concerned, at least in theory, with working with the actual, *situated* realities of everyday life. These user-centred techniques are to be found in commercial designing, particularly for product and service design. Indeed, a major proponent of this approach has been the global design agency Ideo, which has also adopted non-commercial applications (Brown 2009).

Small-scale commercial consultancies such as the Innovation Unit, FutureGov, Design Affects, Snook and UsCreates in the UK, STBY in the Netherlands, Nahman and Yellow Window in Belgium or the Greater Good Studio in the USA, specialise in innovating new forms of service delivery in the public sector. In addition, government-funded units—such as MindLab in Denmark, TACSI in Australia, the PolicyLab in the UK or Región 27e. in France—employ design methods in policymaking. By 2015, there were around 100 of these innovation labs operating around the world (Nesta 2015b).

A set of orthodoxies are circulated between consultant social designers, innovation labs and public sector bodies in three ways. First, movement, in terms of personnel and projects, is often fluid between these consultancies and labs; one becomes a training ground for the other and vice versa. Second, the labs themselves undertake public sector innovations, modelling approaches for clients such as government departments or local councils. This grows the field whilst also setting up particular expectations as to methods and forms of application. Third, an international discursive field is created by and for these labs and consultancies through regular conferences, meet-ups and online publications.

This paper shows the convergence of this consultant version of social design, that is partly shaped through these orthodoxies, with the politics of austerity, but also shifts in public sector administration, governance and conceptions of citizenship. Designers' skills in problem-solving and problem-processing confront demands for financial savings, outsourcing and the pursuit of 'best value' inherited from New Public Management, the pragmatic 'loosening' of administrative structures and the prioritisation of 'user-needs' in service delivery. However, their design techniques invariably emphasise individual use and choice. This leads to the paradox that the *social* is, in fact, frequently absent from consultant social design. While its work aspires to some notion of collectivity, its methods and the financial and bureaucratic arrangements in which it operates

conspire in the opposite direction towards more individualistic conceptions of citizenry.

This turn toward consultant social design is significant for design in general, not least because it marks a serious move toward engagement in public sphere problematics while introducing a more process-centred way of designing. In short, it is where for the first time, design meets policymaking head-on. For urban studies, this turn is symptomatic of wider shifts in conceptions of citizenship and the confluence of forms of urban governance with marketised versions of public life.

Much social design meets the atomisation and evaporation of public administrative processes of service provision. Outsourcing and the stirring up of traditional governance systems and responsibilities both contribute to a more varied and less permanent operational landscape. For those interested in the intersection of social design with urban trends, there is the added challenge of analysing individual case studies while getting a sense of what these mean in broader panoramas of governance. What version of civic life do these constitute? How does design promote certain notions of citizenship? Where *is* the social in social design?

The empirical research for this paper is mainly derived from engagement with UK government policy on design and the public sector (Design Commission 2012) and strategy research on social design for the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (Armstrong et al. 2014). The latter included interviews and workshops with over 60 social design academics and professional practitioners. While its main geographical focus is in the UK, I take into account a rapidly shifting, global terrain of public policy where the above questions are also evident.

Consultant social design and austerity

It is no coincidence that consultant social design has emerged alongside the politics of austerity. Growing inequality across Europe and the Americas has produced urgent clamours for cheaper fixes to pressing social problems. At its most activist end, they arise from pure needs to keep welfare provision going in the face of austerity measures. This is evident, for example, in Spain's 15-M movement's re-appropriation actions, unofficial community welfare programmes and urban agriculture interventions (Abellán, Sequera, and Janoschka 2012; Camps-Calvet et al. 2015). There is a clear activist and voluntarist dimension at play here.

Meanwhile, at another end, commercial design consultancies have emerged that specialise in public sector innovation. Motivated by concerns for the civic domain, they nonetheless are compromised by the political economy of the public sector for which they find themselves working. Budget cuts have taken many public sector interests to the point where service delivery requires wholesale re-design in order to survive at all. Many consultant social design outfits then promote themselves as providing financial savings for the public sector. For example, the Innovation Unit—a London-based consultancy specialising in public sector innovation—offers 'radical efficiency' and 'more for less' (Innovation Unit 2015). Their aim is in developing service delivery through focusing on service-users while influencing the core processes of public sector institutions. An approach is promised in which long-term research relationships are established to generate 'an innovation culture' that enhances their public sector clients' efficiency.

Such appeals are not just made by delivery consultancies. A range of policy-oriented think tanks, foundations and institutions make the same claims that undertaking a more research-led, user-focused approach to 'complex problems' and the design of public services results in efficiency gains and greater effectivity (e.g. Lehki 2007; Design Commission 2012; Design Council 2013; Bason 2013; SEE Platform 2013). These claims are then picked up and reproduced in the innovation labs and consultancies.

We should not be the least bit surprised at the language being used here. After all, while austerity may tighten the screws further on public sector budgets and organisation, much of its rhetoric has been in place for three decades. The reform of public services, be it health, education, the civil service, policing or social services, has become increasingly based upon the application of market principles. Indeed, we may regard this as a coordinated programme that comes as a necessary condition of membership of cross-national arrangements such as the European Union (Metcalfe 1994; Blum and Manning 2009). This originated with the public sector's move from its 'public administration' approach to the so-called New Public Management (NPM) in the 1980s (McLaughlin, Osborne, and Ferlie 2002). Performance measurement and ratings, responsiveness to public demand and contracting out to competitive tendering gradually brought the culture of public services closer to the private sector orthodoxies (Whitfield 2006). Here there has been the requirement to achieve 'best value' (Martin 2000) and to pursue continuous improvement in the public sector. If new roles for design have emerged here, this has not only been the result of any dramatic re-orientation of designers toward public service. It has resulted from the public sector bringing itself closer to the commercially oriented practices and norms to be found in design.

Under austerity the pressure for financial savings has gone beyond tendering out to the cheapest service provider. This now invokes the idea of 'active citizens'. The public sector 'client' may look to re-arranging the citizen–government relationship altogether, therefore. For example, one tactic in the social design armoury, overlapping with social innovation, is in seeing how under-used assets may be set to work in delivering such things as community cohesion, street security or neighbourly care. These include the social design consultancy Participle's 'Circle' system of time-banking for the elderly (Participle 2015) or FutureGov's 'Casserole Club' network to provide home-cooked food by and for neighbours (Nesta 2015a). In both, the aim is to creatively find ways of making use of citizens' free time and skills to produce social benefits. This approach draws on ideas of peer-to-peer support to be found in orthodoxies of the 'sharing economy' (Botsman and Rogers 2010) and the 'relational state' (Cooke and Muir 2012). At the same time, they provide relatively low-cost ways of substituting public sector welfare services and therefore they make financial savings to municipal budgets, it is argued (Brindle 2014).

Professional consultants in this social design domain of public sector work are therefore unavoidably implicated with the politics of austerity. They offer different ways to maintain public services, save money and even boost their efficiency. One way is to enhance a culture of innovation in the 'client' organisation. Another is to leverage the 'ethical economy' of citizen co-production (Arvidsson 2008).

The overall context for initiatives like 'Circle' or 'Casserole' is one where falling municipal and state budgets for the public sector are met with aspirations that involve networked cultures. Here, human relationships are foregrounded (drawing on voluntarism, for example), but there is also an emphasis on the co-production of processes towards this (Cooke and Muir 2012). The roots of much of this thinking lie in the 'soft-left' (Lawson 2015) that was developed from the early 2000s and closely bound up with initiatives promoted through the UK's Design Council (Cottam and Leadbeater 2004), and later at the Young Foundation (Mulgan et al. 2007) and Nesta (e.g. Nesta 2011).

To illustrate this issue further, in 2008, the journal of the Design Council featured a discussion entitled 'Can We Deliver Better Public Services for Less Money?' (Bichard 2008). In the context of the post credit crunch rising national debt and foreseeing the squeezing of public sector spending, this debate was apposite. Ben Reason, director

of service design consultancy LiveIWork, stated in this issue, 'we need to change our relationship with public services, from one where we just expect things to be there for us, to one where we're more engaged in ensuring we don't need them, or managing our way through them'. Avoiding 'unnecessary' use of services and making careful choices within them is a way of saving public money it appears in this account.

What version of the citizen are these social designers working with here, however? Notwithstanding the ambitions for a 'relational state' (RED 2004) and human connectivity, it seems that aspirations toward collectivities are, nonetheless, constantly undermined both by designers' conceptions of 'the user' and by approaches to public sector service management.

Consultant social design and citizens

In sociology it is generally accepted that there is no single definition of the social (Dolwick 2009); nor is the social, as a concept, separable from other domains (Latour 1993; Urry et al. 2007). The social is multiple in how it can be identified and described and in its relations to materialities and spatialities. It can exist at various scales and in various locations. With respect to social design, it follows that the objects of analysis change according to different conceptions and contexts of the social as well. This raises a set of questions as to how collectivities or citizens are conceived and approached within the professional methodologies of consultant social design.

All the Post-Its and sketch notes, as well as the journey mapping produce representations of transactions between users and the services. Invariably, in social design processes the user is represented as a 'persona'—an abstracted figure who is supposed to represent a particular user type (female/male, employed/unemployed, old/middle-aged/young and so on). Alternatively, users are studied by employing versions of ethnographic research or by involving them in co-creation processes. In either case, this user is reduced to a singular entity, navigating his/her way through a service or interface. The units of analysis are those of algorithmic sets of transactions—a conception that is not distant from commercial approaches to brand experience.

This singularisation originates in a user-centred tradition of product design. Its pedigree stems, in part, from developments in industrial design in ergonomics from the 1960s (Waterson and Eason 2009) in which human variance in product use was largely an issue of individual demeanour rather than social practices. This reduction of the object of analysis to the singular user found its way into service and interaction design in the 2000s, both of which have fed into social design. Extending into focus groups, users' observation or ethnography, these methods invariably miss the a priori issue of how these groups are constituted in the first place.

The rise of consultant social design has also coincided with the emergence of 'behaviour change' approaches in government (Jones, Pykett, and Whitehead 2013). Behaviour change appears as a frequent, if not core trope in the offerings of professionalised social design consultancies. For instance, the Chicago-based Greater Good Studio (2015) has claimed that 'We believe that research changes design, design changes behavior, and behavior changes the world.' This view draws from approaches to behavioural psychology (Thaler and Sunstein 2009; Dolan et al. 2012) to address welfare and environmental challenges. The idea is that creating 'choice architectures' will positively influence the ways that people make decisions in their everyday lives. As such, it has been seen as a transfer, via design, of mainstream market mechanisms of behavioural economics to the policy and social sphere, working with a normative concept of the individual as consumer. At the same time, background, shared sociocultural practices, such as those carried, for example, through specific neighbourhoods, or in family or

religious norms are invariably absent from the discussion (Leggett 2014).

If an atomised version of 'the user' is at play in consultant social design practices, this is mirrored by a recent innovation in local government service development. This is to be found, in particular, through Outcome-Based Budgeting (OBB), otherwise known as Outcome-Based Commissioning (OBC). Instead of thinking organisationally and financially in terms of the administrative operations of a service structure, OBB prioritises what wants to be achieved at the use end (KPMG 2011; Law 2013). As such, it is user-centred in its emphasis on prioritising *outcomes* of services for their users (cared-for elderly, healthier adults, educated children, for example). From defining these outcomes, it employs 'reverse engineering' in thinking about how best to achieve these in terms of what combination of organisations, departments and institutions can best and most cheaply provide that solution. OBB therefore favours a designerly approach in its focus on the end-contexts of use rather than on delivery mechanism. Concurrently, it views the design of each 'service delivery' as a problem-solving project. In turn, however, this end-on view conspires to see public sector services as isolated deliverables rather than functions that are woven together to support or form a coherent and understandable of civic life.

Behind the more recent shift toward OBB, 30 years of NPM approaches have led to the fragmentation and spatial loosening of public sector processes. The outsourcing of its functions to commercial and not-for-profit entities such as charities or voluntary organisations is undertaken in search of 'best value' (Martin 2000). However, rigid, metrics-driven public sector bureaucracies are perceived as producing restraints on the potential for service innovations (Design Commission 2012; Christensen 2013). This is where, it is argued, a shift beyond NPM to 'network governance', which involves more flexible co-production methods of policymaking and delivery, is perceived to open up a space for design methods and designers (Parker and Heapy 2006; Bentley 2014; Kimbell and Bailey 2017). It produces pragmatically arranged, alternative spaces to traditional structures of governance and service delivery.

To briefly extend this general argument into some thinking on urban planning, this loosening has some resonance with so-called 'soft spaces of governance' (Allmendinger and Haughton 2010; Haughton, Allmendinger, and Oosterlyn 2013). In public administration, soft spaces of governance arise in through bottom-up planning where, typically, end-users are not necessarily concerned with 'official' scales and boundaries of governmental administration. Business development zones or neighbourhood regeneration programmes, for example, may not necessarily map onto established areas of administrative responsibility. Similar to OBB, there is a pragmaticism at play here which has the advantage of promoting greater inclusion of citizens at the expense of formal planning systems and rigidities of governance (Olesen 2012, 911).

Several challenges emerge here. In all this loosening, fragmentation and the uncertainty that it produces, we can never be sure whose particular interests are being represented amongst those 'representing' or represented citizens (Swyngedouw 2005). How does social design iron out dissent or difference in what it means to be a citizen (Fortier 2010)? How do the design outcomes include and exclude individuals and groups in their membership of society? Governmental interests may give advantage to certain networks over others. By using these consultant social designers, they may appear to be building decision-making and designing outside their own bureaucracies. But one has to consider which groups it is choosing to foreground over others in particular spatial contexts. What groups that were previously represented through other systems are now excluded in this new system?

Consultant social design as it relates to citizenship might be taken as a way by which the material and immaterial features of everyday

life, and the processes that produce these, make and unmake citizens (Weber 2010, 11). It aims to look to the situated, place-bound sets of social interactions and practices at play. But this is tricky if its processes are corralled into treating the user as an individualised actor and where there is an emergent tendency to think in terms of atomised and administratively pragmatic and flexible ways of managing and governing much of the public sphere. If there are ambitions to champion a human-centred approach to the design of public services, then a number of questions arise as to who is being represented and what version of the social is at play in these accounts.

Conclusion

Consultant social designers aim to design new services that are more 'user-centred' and are cheaper in the contexts of recent austerity politics and the longer, neo-liberal history of public sector change. They play into shifts in the public sector and in government in terms of moves from public administration to NPM to networked governance. Austerity opens up opportunities for these consultants to be active while at the same time reducing the scope for their intervention. They look to new arrangements between the public sector and citizens, drawing in part from the rubrics of the 'sharing economy' or the 'relational state'. But they are also driven by or forced into the same pragmatic, problem-solving reductionism. Their methods are largely inherited from commercial applications of design where citizens are viewed as individualised users of public services. This leads one to question exactly who is being represented in their design methods and whether there really is a robust understanding and exploration of the social in this area of social design.

If social design is to play a significant role in forging new political ontologies and forms of citizenship, then it has a long way to go in developing its conceptual frameworks and criticality. A useful starting point may be to develop a deeper understanding of its own history, understanding how particular formats of designing have evolved that mostly foregrounds individual over social agency. Their limits in the new landscape of austerity might therefore also be better understood. Consequently, a more rigorous and thoughtful enquiry into what might constitute the social in social design requires consideration. The possibility that social design is actually concerned with intervening on social and material relations and what this might imply needs a more urgent discussion. At the same time, the limitations of social design need articulating in any given situation. To what extent is all the talk of so-called 'complex social problems', and the role of design in addressing these, in fact a smokescreen for avoiding bold policy decisions? In the meantime, despite their best intentions, social design consultants may be paving the road to austerity hell.

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