

# DESIGN ACTIVISM

## Introduction Material Preference and Design Activism

**Guy Julier, Guest Editor**

If there is not a place for us in this world, another world must be made ... What is missing is yet to come.

(Communiqué of the Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional Sixth Commission, México, September 15–16, 2008)

Design activism reallocates resources, reconfigures systems, and reprioritizes interests. It is necessarily broad in its scope and aims. In campaigning terms it includes communication forms to incite participation in movements that cross from survival values to self-expression values. Design activism also produces campaigning artifacts – reflexive objects that function in utilitarian terms, but through these also politicize. It analyzes and critiques systems of provision, looking for or proposing non-mainstream models to create alternative constellations of people and artifacts and rearrange the channels between them. It

develops processes that ensure democratic participation in the determining of design outcomes. It moves between materialist and postmaterialist interests, but also synthesizes the two. In the context of these precarious times – as the forty-year project of neoliberalism is severely challenged by long-term recession, as social injustices and political outrages increasingly appear at the surface, and as global warming goes unabated – design activism also creates new ontologies.

Design activism's political drive is often lost as it gets entangled in the pragmatic but necessary questions of its implementation. It has many overlaps with other practices, including social design, co-creation, sustainable design, and critical design. In this overlapping, it can get subsumed into competing interests. But the events of the last five years have brought on a sharpening of design activism, both in its practices and its discussion. Design activism is overtly material in that it grapples with the everyday stuff of life; it is also resolutely driven by ideas and understandings. It is a making of politics.

The Zapatista declaration cited at the head of this editorial, stating that “another world must be made” (EZLN 2008), was issued on precisely the same day that the investment bank, Lehman Brothers, filed for bankruptcy. September 2008 was the month that the US banking crisis reached its most critical point. Thenceforth, one third of the USA's lending mechanisms would be frozen until June 2009 and foreclosures on real estate in the USA surpassed 3 million in that year. And yet, according to Marxist geographer David Harvey (2010), much of this crisis was caused by “surplus liquidity.” This means that within the neoliberal system, there was too much capital chasing sources of value. Economies were out of kilter: banks were leveraging their financial assets by up to thirty times, but the options for where to place this “invented money” were closing down.

You may be forgiven for thinking that this sounds all too unreal, too *virtual*. But since the 2008 banking crisis, the neoliberal remedy has been expressed through governmental austerity measures that attack very real fixtures of public life. Prior to the crisis, governmental expansion of state welfare and health programs, particularly in Europe, was made on a wave of economic optimism that was itself fueled by growth in the financial and property systems (e.g. see Elliott and Atkinson 2007). Now, neoliberal governments express a sense of “back to reality” – now things have to be paid for with real money in real time.

However, *what* “things” are allocated? And *whose* “reality” is privileged?

The Zapatista statement inferred that global priorities were themselves out of kilter with people's aspirations. Their position was far from the neoliberal focus on GDP growth, on the free market at whatever cost, and on the privatization of any form of the commons. A sense of the dislocation of governance from the citizenry is echoed in Spain, where, according to sociologist Manuel Castells,

70 percent of its adult population supported the *indignados* (the outraged) movement in its campaign against austerity measures (Castells 2012a). Castells adds that he believes that these same people, contrary to government policy, do not see that there is a quick fix for the economic crisis. A possible alternative future is imagined by the *indignados* slogan of “*vamos despacio porque vamos lejos*” (we’re going slowly because we’re going far). Equally, Castells says of the Occupy movement that “[i]ts quest aims at eradicating evil in the present, while reinventing community for the future” (Castells 2012b: 107). The protests look backwards to reveal the injustices that financial capitalism has wrought. They mark a moment of historical consciousness. In looking forwards, they neither define a material nor a postmaterial preference. Rather, it seems that at this stage, the *process* by which this future is made is more important than the need to know what the future might include.

The lack of a precise definition by the Occupy movement of what this “future” might be like reveals an interesting complexity of our political times. In 1971, Ronald Inglehart published an influential sociological paper that argued, through quantitative population analysis, that a new generation was coming through in Europe that looked toward a postmaterial ethic. In short, a rise of anti-consumerist politics was tied to a more affluent generation that had come of age in the 1960s. He suggested that, with the rise of postmaterialism, there was more likelihood of an engagement in unconventional political behavior such as occupations and boycotts. Inglehart reviewed his research again in 2008, firstly arguing that his findings continued to be correct and, secondly, that this intergenerational shift from survival values to self-expression values was becoming globally more widespread. Survival values place their political emphasis on material needs such as housing, while self-expression values are concerned with interpersonal trust and subjective wellbeing.

In political struggles, this supposed move from survival to self-expression values (or, otherwise, materialism to postmaterialism) is not so clear-cut, however (e.g. see Berg 2002). After all, in the USA, disability rights activists campaign for physical access to buildings, healthcare, or workplace rights; the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) campaigns for medical research or affordable housing. Urban campaigns such as Imagine Chicago or Meu Rio include aspirations toward postmaterial values of community and sharing; but these are also bound up in material questions of environment and planning. These are collective and constructive struggles. Here, both material and postmaterial questions are concerned with the public sphere, rather than the individual. By contrast, while the subvertising of Adbusters might be a reference point for a history of design activism, this is largely a phenomenon that, in addressing the individual consumer, is reacting to given circumstances rather than proposing a materially different public world.

### **Design Activism and Social Change, Barcelona 2011**

This special issue on design activism springs from the 2011 Design Activism and Social Change conference in Barcelona. Design activism has been a strong, central theme at a number of conferences, including Changing the Change in Turin (2008), NORDES in Helsinki in 2011, What Design Can Do in Amsterdam (2011), and Cumulus in Aspen (2011). However, in a more concentrated way, the Barcelona conference brought together one hundred papers from thirty-four countries to explore historical, theoretical, and practice questions of design activism. The energy and rigor of study that flowed through the conference shows how live and widespread the desire was to share histories and viewpoints on the subject.

Of particular note was the strength of new research into political movements in the design history of the 1970s, from Cuba to Lebanon and from Portugal to Norway. There is much to be gained through a detailed, critical analysis of international contexts and flows of design here. This was a crucial decade for so many interests. Neoliberalism was, arguably, kick-started in 1971 when President Nixon unilaterally pulled the USA out of the Bretton Woods agreement. This year also saw the English publication of Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World*. This went on to be possibly the most globally successful design book ever, with publication in over twenty languages. Papanek's no-nonsense critique paid particular attention to economic questions: part of his invective was directed at the grand bluff of design concerning how specialist "designed" goods could be sold on at exorbitant prices. Another approach of Papanek's was to take on the relationship between obsolescence and waste, picking up on the tradition of the critique of consumer culture from Vance Packard.

In her contribution to this issue, which is entitled "'Actions Speak Louder': Victor Papanek and the Legacy of Design Activism," Alison Clarke emphasizes another narrative. While acknowledging an influence from American consumer-rights discourse and green politics, she positions the development of Papanek's thinking in the workshops that he ran in Finland and other Nordic countries in the late 1960s. In so doing, Clarke's spotlight falls more sharply on his productive laboratories of participatory design. Papanek saw activism as being rooted in the student movement that favored workshop-based action, prototyping, and real experimentation over the bland rhetoric expressed at design conferences.

A "call to arms" for the socially responsible designer has almost been standard fare at international design conferences. When I saw Victor Papanek speak at Design Renaissance in Glasgow (1993), this clamor was frequently to be attached to a vague notion of design's modernist inheritance by other contributors. I don't think Papanek was particularly impressed with (what he would have called) such "Martini statements." His material and political preferences were far more pragmatic.

Perhaps the time wasn't right in the early 1990s for design to be more clearly attached to political action: Western Europe, China, and the USA were enjoying economic growth through most of this decade, while the former Soviet bloc was dismantled and went through democratic elections and market reforms. It wouldn't be until 1999 that the anti-globalization protests, beginning in Seattle, got under way. In the meantime, the challenge to "design responsibly" might only gain traction when it was aligned with the possibility of tapping into new markets, for example through design for the elderly or for specific cultural groups. Thus, user observation or design ethnography would emerge more strongly as tools for competitive advantage than as genuinely democratic design. Despite the best of intentions, the professional designer often finds it difficult to disobey the giant (Poyner 2007).

### Resistances and Entanglements

In "Quiet Activism and the New Amateur: The Power of Home and Hobby Crafts," Fiona Hackney takes us on a quite different tack. Taking a longer historical view from the 1930s to the present, she draws on De Certeau's notion of "*la perruque*" (the wig) to show how the "tricksy strategies" of disguise are mobilized in amateur crafting like knitting and embroidery. While in content these practices can be deliberately subversive and quietly political, she also shows us how, historically, they have produced alternative economies of making and swapping. Through her close analysis, Hackney is pointing to a distinctive set of ontologies that challenge traditional, professionalized notions of design.

An anthropological account of contemporary design activism in Helsinki by Eeva Berglund places activist design in the context of Finnish consensus politics. Her article, "Design as Activism in Helsinki: Notes from the World Design Capital 2012," reveals the particularly problematic issue of placing localized activist practices against another scale of promoting the city in a global context. Berglund's fine-grained approach draws attention in particular to the micro-understandings and -negotiations that take place at independent and civic levels around activist design. These result in a layering of the meanings for it.

In all these contributions, design activism's entanglement and separation from mainstream social and economic processes keeps recurring. They also, in various ways, suggest that a synthesis of materialist and postmaterialist politics occurs through design activism. My own article-length contribution to this issue, "From Design Culture to Design Activism," tries to draw out some kind of theoretical understanding of the "to-ing and fro-ing" between neoliberal design practices and contexts and activist design. I conclude with four possible conceptual tactics for the activist designer that are also to be found in particular qualities in the mainstream design culture and economy.

If the focus of the main articles in this issue is mostly on north-west Europe and the USA, then we have attempted to balance this

in our “Global Design Activism Survey.” Harun Kaygan in Ankara and myself in London solicited the views of design historians, critics, and practitioners in ten countries on the precise activities and challenges of design activism in their respective locations. This survey is not intended as exhaustive; rather, it attempts to give some personal snapshots of design activism in a variety of places. The responses that came from Barcelona, Beirut, Bogotá, Cape Town, Delhi, Istanbul, Kolding, New York, Seoul, and Warsaw illustrate the specificity of local issues and their histories as well as the way that other concerns are shared among them.

Design activism expresses certain choices and raises so many questions about the way the material and human world should be. It often enrolls people who are dedicated to design activism’s development and, indeed, its critique, in unpaid labor. In this respect, I am hugely grateful to the authors who have given their time and energy to sharing their research and thoughts through this special issue. I am also indebted to the anonymous reviewers who provided constructive and sharp feedback, as well as Elizabeth Guffey and the Design Studies Forum, who supported the instigation of this special issue. I hope that its making both consolidates our historical consciousness and provides succor for future action. To repeat, “another world must be made ... What is missing is yet to come.”

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