# Keeping the System Going: Social Design and the Reproduction of Inequalities in Neoliberal Times
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1   Dung-Sheng Chen, Lu-Lin Cheng, Caroline Hummels, and Ilpo Koskinen, "Social Design: An introduction," *International Journal of Design* 10, no. 1 (2016): 1–5.

2   Otto von Busch and Karl Palmås, "Social Means Do Not Justify Corruptible Ends: A Realist Perspective of Social Innovation and Design," She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation 2, no. 4 (2016): 275–87; Ahmed Ansari, "Politics and Method," Modes of Criticism, 2016, http://modesofcriticism.org/politics-method/ (accessed January 15, 2018).

3   Thomas Markussen, "The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism: Enacting Design Between Art and Politics," Design Issues 29, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 38–50; Tristan Schultz, Danah Abdulla, Ahmed Ansari, Ece Canlı, Mahmoud Keshavarz, Matthew Kiem, Luiza Prado de O. Martins, and Pedro Vieira de Oliveira, "What Is at Stake with Decolonizing Design? A Roundtable," *Design and Culture* 10, no.1 (2018): 81–101, DOI: 10.1080/17547075.2018.1434368.

4   Jesper Christensen and Laura Bunt, *Innovation in Policy: Allowing for Creativity, Social Complexity and Uncertainty in Public Governance* (London: Nesta, 2012).

5   For example, Joe T. Darden, and Elvin Wyly, "Cartographic Editorial—Mapping the Racial/Ethnic Topography of Subprime Inequality in Urban America," *Urban Geography* 31, no. 4 (2010): 425–33; Richard Peet, "Inequality, Crisis and Austerity in Finance Capitalism," *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 4, no. 3 (2011): 383–99; Tim Jackson, "The Post-Growth Challenge: Secular Stagnation, Inequality and the Limits to Growth," CUSP Working Paper No 12 (Guildford: University of Surrey, 2018).

6   Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Belknap Press, 2014).

Since the 2008 financial crisis, it has become increasingly common to find people trained in product, user experience, or service design involved in designing systems and configurations to achieve social or policy goals in the Global North.[1] This expansion of design practices has been accompanied by growing awareness of the challenges resulting from designers tackling social issues, or from design methods being used to address policy challenges.[2]

Such designing aims to effect social changes, but few, if any, of these professionals explicitly claim to engage with inequalities. Such a claim would be a political one. It would recognize design as a *bona fide* conduit for confronting, exposing, and ameliorating inequalities, as well as the structural and ideological causes of these inequalities. If there is a version of social design that does this, we take this to overlap with design activism and the decolonizing design agenda, whose quests for political agency are clearer.[3] However, at the same time we recognize that practitioners within social design have a sense of agency. Social design provides a space to engage their core ethical values.[4] The themes that they address—such as homelessness, healthcare, education, or unemployment—involve tackling symptoms of inequalities, if not their causes.

To tackle inequalities head on through social design is a big, if not impossible, task in these neoliberal times. The case for a link between the neoliberal economic systems that have coursed around the world since the 1980s, and inequalities is incontrovertible. Countless studies demonstrate not only economic but also legal, property, educational, racial/ethnic, health and well-being inequalities as the result of financialist neoliberal modes.[5] Put more generally, the domination of rentier capitalism within neoliberal modes of production and consumption is, by necessity, dependent on inequalities.[6] Financialization requires the on-going use of labor in all its monetary and non-monetary forms, as well as social and natural capital, in ways that directly and indirectly produce inequalities.[7] For finance to thrive, it has to get others to work on its behalf.

7   Jacob Assa, "Financialization and its Consequences: The OECD Experience," *Finance Research* 1, no. 1 (2012): 35–39; Ken-Hou Lin and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey, "Financialization and US income inequality, 1970–2008," *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 5 (2013): 1284–329; Joanna Boehnert, "The Green Economy: Reconceptualizing the Natural Commons as Natural Capital," *Environmental Communication* 10, no. 4 (2016): 395–417.

8   Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

9   Patrick Diamond and Roger Liddle, "Aftershock: The Post-crisis Social Investment Welfare State in Europe," *Towards a Social Investment Welfare State? Ideas, Policies and Challenges* (2012): 285–308.

10  Yvonne Hartman, "In Bed With the Enemy: Some Ideas on the Connections Between Neoliberalism and the Welfare State," *Current Sociology* 53, no. 1 (2005): 57–73.

11  Betsy Donald et al., "Austerity in the City: Economic Crisis and Urban Service Decline?" *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society,* no. 7 (2014): 3–15.

12  Jamie Peck, "Political Economies of Scale: Fast Policy, Interscalar Relations, and Neoliberal Workfare," *Economic Geography* 78, no. 3 (2002): 331–60; Erik Swyngedouw, "Governance Innovation and the Citizen: The Janus Face of Governance-Beyond-the-State," *Urban Studies* 42, no. 11 (2005): 1991–2006.

13  Dexter Whitfield, *Public Services or Corporate Welfare: Rethinking the Nation State in the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2001).

14  Guy Julier, "Consultant Social Design, Austerity and Citizenry," *City* 21, no. 6 (2017): 813–21.

15  Frank Fischer, "Participatory Governance as Deliberative Empowerment: The Cultural Politics of Discursive Space," *The American Review of Public Administration* 36, no. 1 (2006): 19–40.

Indeed, one might go further to view social design—particularly in its professionalized, consultant modes—as having benefited from the spaces that are opened by austerity measures that have resulted in welfare budget cuts in many countries. Since the 1980s, the exponential growth of economic inequalities has been exacerbated by the steady retreat of the "safety net" of the state as a device for addressing inequality issues.[8] In addition, the "aftershock" of the economic crisis of 2008 made state responses to long-term challenges, such as aging populations and climate change, that much harder as they prioritized dealing with government indebtedness.[9] Nonetheless, for many states, maintaining health and wellbeing and, at least, ensuring a modicum of equality is still seen as necessary to the functioning of their economic systems.[10] Capitalism still requires healthy, educated, and motivated citizens.

This tension between austerity economics and addressing inequalities has led to a "downloading" of state responsibility for welfare, and for tackling inequalities, to the more localized settings of cities, communities, and citizens.[11] This change of scale also entails a breaking of the social contract of the (Keynesian) welfare state, previously held at the national level, and introduces instead a different locus of experimentalism in policy and implementation.[12] In neoliberal governance, tackling inequalities—rather than being held at the regulated, state-level of accountability—becomes the responsibility of changing and multifarious collections of local government departments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private companies, community groups, and other entities such as religious institutions.[13]

In this process of downloading, design activities fashion local responses to austerity and problem-solving. They play the role not just of addressing social challenges, but also of producing cost savings for hard-pressed municipalities or welfare organizations. Thus, in response to the challenges of falling welfare budgets, social design consultancies have positioned themselves as developing innovative ways to restructure state–citizen relationships while promising cost savings.[14]

Notwithstanding this latter motive, and to strike a more positive note, social designers might make and, indeed, have made several other contributions. The new, more localized organizational spaces of experimentation may be read as a shift to "networked governance," in which government structures, such as municipalities, work within networks of partnership, cooperation and collaboration between entities of government, outsourced service providers, organizations of civil society and citizens themselves. There is an expectation of a move from centralized, professionally-dominated bureaucracies to more client- or citizen-oriented approaches.[15]

In this environment, and in particular in addressing inequalities, and the many ways by which inequalities are manifested and experienced, social designers may, for instance, undertake roles in:

- enabling public servants and other actors to gain new perspectives on ways of co-producing public services; for example, working closely with a municipality, residents, and other stakeholders to develop an upcycling station as a co-produced public service for handling and reducing waste in Sweden[16];
- recognizing the cultural and technological specificities of actors and devices within a setting; for example, running several workshops with device-centered creative tasks to understand the situatedness of people involved in a handcraft community in Cambodia[17];
- co-designing new possibilities of resource use and new systems and products to leverage pre-existing resources and social relationships; for example, organizing a multi-stakeholder collaboration to generate alternative scenarios for eating sustainably and assessing the desirability of these.[18]

Meanwhile, within the growth of social design, social innovation, and related fields, considerations of method and approach in the field and in education have been explored.[19] And yet, the enormity and strength of the structural conditions that give rise to the problems that they purport to address are only briefly considered in these accounts. The organization of budgets, processes of implementation within policy cycles, or the valorization of impact are all everyday questions that relate, ultimately, to neoliberal modes of governance. Furthermore, the entanglement of social design with these modes and the actual ways through which they shape social designers' practices require discussion.

One way of looking at social design follows a distinction between "market" design and "social" design.[20] Others have argued that design can only ever be *responsive* to social situations, rather than having responsibility for changing them, and should aim to produce "good enough" design outcomes.[21] But another perspective highlights the complex entanglements between design cultures and modes of capitalist production. Here design expertise configures and is configured by features such as complex systems of outsourcing and subcontracting or the calculation of social value in monetary terms.[22] This perspective suggests that a distinction between "market" and "social" design is too simple when trying to account for contemporary design practices. In these circumstances, we might view social design as existing, as a professional identity, relationally to other professional and organizational demands rather than in terms of a clear set of normative positions.[23]

16  Anna Seravalli, Mette Agger Eriksen, and Per-Anders Hillgren, "Co-design in Co-production Processes: Jointly Articulating and Appropriating Infrastructuring and Commoning with Civil Servants," *CoDesign* 13, no. 3 (2017): 187–201. DOI: 10.1080/15710882.2017.1355004.

17  Lina Kang, "Social Design as a Creative Device in Developing Countries: The Case of a Handcraft Pottery Community in Cambodia," *International Journal of Design* 10, no. 3 (2016): 65–74.

18  Anna R. Davies, "Food Futures: Co-designing Sustainable Eating Practices for 2050," *EuroChoices* 12, no. 2 (2013): 4–11.

19  See, e.g., Ezio Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015); and Matthew W. Easterday et al., "Social Innovation Networks: A New Approach to Social Design Education and Impact," *Design Issues* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 64–76.

20  Victor Margolin and Sylvia Margolin, "A 'Social Model' of Design: Issues of Practice and Research," *Design Issues* 18, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 24–30.

21  Adam Thorpe and Lorraine Gamman, "Design with Society: Why Socially Responsive Design Is Good Enough," *CoDesign* 7, no. 3-4, (2011): 217–30. DOI: 10.1080/15710882.2011.630477.

22  Guy Julier, *Economies of Design* (London: Sage, 2017), chp. 8.

23  David Wang and Ali O. Ilhan, "Holding Creativity Together: A Sociological Theory of the Design Professions," *Design Issues* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 5–21.

Some design literatures have recognized the complex social, technological, and organizational systems that designers are (re)designing.[24] However, we question whether professional design practices, as currently configured, are equipped to identify and address the inequalities that can result from such interventions. In the following sections, we take a closer look at social design to discuss two reasons for this lack. First, we review the institutional structures within which social design operates to demonstrate how its precarious status mitigates against the consolidation of a legitimate professional practice. Second, we show how its approach and methods are performed in ways that draw the focus of practice away from the problems it seeks to address. These two issues, we conclude, make it difficult for designers to respond to inequalities that are produced through and that sustain neoliberal ways of organizing resources. Despite these concerns, however, we identify opportunities that might enable social design practice to live up to its hopes.

**Structuring Social Design**
As we have already identified, social design has emerged and consolidated since 2008 in response to government policies in the Global North that ensure the weakening of state functions, particularly in welfare responsibilities. This has taken place in part through the outsourcing of services to private companies, NGOs and other entities. They have produced considerable "pull" in terms of creating opportunities to practice social design. However, two strands emanating from design and nearby practices have provided some "push" in this development. The first one is the overlapping of activist practices, such as community action, with professional modes of design consultancy. The second one is developments in design and management practices, including customer experience, data science, and social entrepreneurship.[25] Social design has a hybrid genealogy, and is diverse in its practices and locations.

Several professionalized forms of social design are evident. First, small-scale consultancies provide expertise to local, regional, and national state functions in specialist areas, such as health and social care (e.g., InWithForward, Toronto; Futuregov, London), and they do this alongside teams in larger consultancies (e.g., Capita). Second, organizational units, often in government or government-funded entities, use design methods in developing solutions to policy issues. Examples have included MindLab in Denmark, TACSI in Australia, Policy Lab in the United Kingdom, the Public Policy Lab in New York City, and La 27e Región in France.[26] Third, thinktanks, innovation bodies, and foundations—for example, Nesta (UK), Rockefeller Foundation (US) and MaRS (Canada)—advocate and support the dissemination of social design. Often

24 See, e.g., Pelle Ehn et al., *Making Futures: Marginal Notes on Innovation, Design, and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

25 Leah Armstrong et al., *Social Design Futures: HEI Research and the AHRC* (Brighton: University of Brighton, 2014).

26 Michael McGann, Emma Blomkamp, and Jenny Lewis, "The Rise of Public Sector Innovation Labs: Experiments in Design Thinking for Policy," *Policy Sciences* 51, no. 3, (2018): 249–67. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-018-9315-7.

27  Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (1983): 147–60; Richard W. Scott, "The Adolescence of Institutional Theory," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 32, no. 4, (1987): 493–511; and Philip Selznick, "Institutionalism 'Old' and 'New,'" *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1996): 270–77.

28  Ali O. Ihan, "Growth or Decline? A Longitudinal Analysis of Factors Affecting the Institutional Trajectories of Five Design Disciplines in the United States," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 2, no. 4 (2017): 300–21.

29  Andrew Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

30  Architects Regulation Board, "About ARB," http://www.arb.org.uk/about-arb/ (accessed March 21, 2018).

31  Erik Sigge, "Architecture's Red Tape: Government Building Construction in Sweden, 1963–1973. The Example of the National Board of Public Building, KBS (Kungliga Byggnadsstyrelsen)" (PhD diss., KTH Royal Institute of Technology, 2017).

32  Max Rolfstam and Jacob Buur, "An Institutional View on User Improvisation and Design," in *Design and Anthropology,* eds. Wendy Gunn and Jared Donnovan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).

33  Some professions such as engineering and audit are closely tied to regulatory supervision whereas others such as management consultancy are not and find legitimacy in other ways. See Christopher McKenna, *The World's Newest Profession: Management Consulting in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

supported through endowments or sponsorships, they use design in social innovation projects, bring professionals together, set agendas, and distribute resources, such as toolkits.

This variety and hybridity of social design reflects a wider framework of institutional logics in which different design professions exist. Understanding the kinds of expertise that are produced and validated through different organizational practices requires being attentive to professional design's histories and institutional locations. The approach, known as institutional theory, prompts us to identify the contingent relationships and environments that are combined to produce the object of our study: professional social design practice.[27]

Designers working within different traditions have varying competences, identities, resources, and accountabilities giving them legitimacy. Reviewing the origin stories of industrial design in the United States, for instance, llhan argues that the former found legitimacy from negotiating between technical and aesthetic competences, as well as between culture and the market place.[28] For Ilhan, design disciplines in the US academy were always hybrids, reliant on interdependencies with architecture, engineering and fine art within an ecosystem of disciplines.[29]

This hybridity in design contrasts strongly with architecture, which is much more fixed, normative and bounded as a profession. For example, in the United Kingdom, only people who have been through training approved by the Architects Regulation Board, a statutory body, and are registered with it are legally entitled to practice as architects.[30] Equally, the practice of architecture itself reinforces its disciplinary boundaries and consolidates professional identity and legitimacy. The "red tape" of practicing as an architect—such as coordinating with planning officers, consulting with neighborhood stakeholders, and fulfilling safety requirements—puts several layers of checks and balances into play. In turn, these checks and balances provoke investigation into and debate about the broader conditions of architecture and the roles that it serves.[31]

For designers, professional norms are institutionalized in different ways and are more in flux.[32] Their expertise is not regulated by statute or by professional bodies; where they are held accountable to society, it is through internal or external clients and investment, rather than through statutory mechanisms.[33] In many countries, there are no statutory bodies determining and regulating who qualifies as a product, service, or social designer, or what these designers should know or be able to do. In this situation, a struggle for professional legitimation and recognition exists. In contrast to architecture, the fragmentation of the design industry, its lack of any legal framework, and low participation in its professional bodies constantly mitigate against a higher level of investigation and debate as to design's societal functions.

The low level of participation by designers in professional bodies is striking, although the level does vary across countries. For example, efforts in the United Kingdom to create a chartered profession for design, similar to architecture and the engineering professions, resulted in the formation of a body called the Chartered Society of Designers, founded in 1976. However, without the statutory requirement delineating the scope of the profession and defining its expertise, it has struggled to find agency and purpose or, indeed, members. A Design Council survey found that almost 1.6 million people worked in the design economy in the United Kingdom in 2014 across all fields, including digital, graphic, and industrial design and architecture.[34] In contrast, membership of the Chartered Society of Designers has averaged only about 2,500 since 2000.[35] Furthermore, the flattening of expertise—"design when everyone designs," as Manzini puts it—also brings into question the specialist competences of professionals.[36]

The lack of normative structures and low level of professional representation in design is not necessarily a weakness. Rather, it opens up possibilities for swift responses to changing social, economic, and technological conditions, endowing it with flexibility; design, appropriately, can constantly re-design itself. The unfolding inventions of new specialisms of design since the 1980s has therefore worked against the establishment of normative professional standards. Each one of these specialisms—whether leisure design during the 1990s, interaction design during the 2000s, or social design during the 2010s—might demand specific knowledge, commercial processes, and ethical standards. Thus, the hybridity in the origins and formation of social design is typical of the wider design industry. It is symptomatic of a constant churn within it and of its entanglement with related specialisms. Thus, social designers might be subjected to the internal limits of their own field, where there is little time for the consolidation or testing of thinking and approach. Reflection on political and ethical questions are curtailed by the field's own emergent qualities.

The norms of social design are shaped and reshaped, not only by the inputs of its related fields, but also in terms of the policy landscape, the systems of governance, the economies of welfare provision and the technologies that are embodied in the array of clients, stakeholders, and publics with which the field is enmeshed.[37] However, this external environment to which it responds is in a constant state of flux as well. In neoliberal modes of governance, policies themselves are "fast" or "agile," in that they are constantly reactive to emerging challenges that are processed and experimented with in localized contexts, rather than as part of the responsibilities of the nation-state.[38] Forming professional and moral authority or legitimacy is challenging for social designers in this constantly changing context. The next section focuses on how,

34  Design Council, *The Design Economy: The Value of Design to the UK* (London: Design Council, 2015).

35  Leah Armstrong, "Steering a Course Between Professionalism and Commercialism: The Society of Industrial Artists and the Code of Conduct for the Professional Designer 1945–1975," *Journal of Design History* 29, no. 2 (2015): 161–79.

36  Manzini, Design, *When Everybody Designs*.

37  For a view on the future of professions see Richard Susskind and Daniel Susskind, *The Future of the Professions: How Technology Will Transform the Work of Human Experts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

38  Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, *Fast Policy: Experimental Statecraft at the Thresholds of Neoliberalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

in practice, this authority is sometimes established and how this process might, in fact, divert attention away from the actual work of addressing inequalities.

## Performing Social Design

In this section, we shift the lens on social design and consider its everyday practices. What do social designers actually do? And how do they appear to engage with social change?

The rise of social design is accompanied by a new material culture of design practice that has become populated with Post-it notes, Play-doh models, and cardboard models incorporating Lego, string and Blue-tac. As with other organizational "design thinking," people involved in a project use such materials to explore and generate solutions to issues that often go way beyond the bounds of experiences of products and services. Traditionally, design has been represented photographically through the reified, finished object, often floating in space, devoid of context of use or the imprint of process. By contrast, images of social design emphasize the messy, unfinished, and emergent qualities of the process of doing. This shift may not be surprising given that the outcomes of social design are typically not objects but are things such as adjustments to policies or new systems of support whose value is in their use, rather than in their physical presence. However, this new emphasis on the doing of social design hides a danger that lurks in its performance.

In laying out Post-it notes on a wall, questions and solutions emerge very quickly. Methods such as "customer journey mapping" provide limited accounts of such things as bureaucracies, people, know-how, everyday things and their use, and their configurations. Bottlenecks, misalignments, or unnoticed resources are identified. Ameliorations are inserted. And through such processes, participants doing social design may perceive a complex problem differently and get a *feeling* of change. However, real change happens in the slow, tricky, and political work of implementation.

This is put succinctly in the following comment by a member of a public-sector innovation lab:

> …it can feel a bit like the same group of people talking to each other about the same ideas, with a bit too much affection for Post-it notes and bunting and with not enough focus on impact.… [T]he real challenge to anyone working in this space is to ensure that at the beginning of a project, you aren't just creating a great piece of work, you're also anticipating how the change is actually going to happen.… Unless we focus on impact and what that looks like, there's a danger that Lab work just ends up as some really nice Post-it notes on a wall somewhere.[39]

39 Sophia Parker, "Lab Notes Interview with Sophia Parker, Founder of Social Innovation Lab for Kent," interview by Cassie Robinson (2015), http://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/lab-notes-interview-sophia-parker-founder-social-innovation-lab-kent#sthash.7exkK6Hy.dpuf (accessed December 12, 2015).

Not only do such scenarios provide the illusion of change; but they are also used as part of their own advocacy. The change that social design proposes, and thus the resolution of issues such as inequalities, are encapsulated and *sealed into* the Post-its and their representation. Reports and social media are redolent with such images. This representation is not just a case of the Post-its as symbols of the processes of social change. The social change itself gets attached to them. By way of both similarity and contrast to this, and in the context of social welfare and design in Sweden, Murphy demonstrates how this dynamic works and where meanings are semiotically forced around and into products.[40] Connotations of equality or social democracy are inscribed into these and are constantly reproduced through their representation and reproduction in national circuits of culture.

Frequently in social design practices, things are virtual; they are real but not actual.[41] Accounts of individual behavior or social and economic activity become models of how things should be in ways that are disconnected from how they would play out in actuality. The challenges of navigating a project through existing bureaucracies in relation to their current and historical institutional drivers, such as new public management, audit culture, or digital transformation, are downplayed in this process.

Another difficulty, not unrelated to this notion of virtualism, is in the institutional infrastructures that promote the case for design-led social innovation or public sector innovation. We have noted that some organizations, supported through endowments, or directly by governments, are engaged in developing and promoting these. The danger here is that orthodoxies flow like memes through and between these institutions, without critically assessing what is possible or even politically desirable. For instance, in a study of design toolkits in Pakistan aimed at non-designers, Ansari claims that they crowd out and suppress local knowledge and thought.[42] He argues that the focus on designing a product or service promoted by powerful actors, such as foundations, can ignore alternative perspectives that challenge assumptions about, for example, economic growth.

By extension, one might consider how being "human-centered," in such social designing, attends to the users as individuated beings, cast adrift from the social, cultural, and political settings within which they have subjectivity and agency. Illustrated outputs of social design, such as personas or user journey maps, can travel through networks of project partners detached from specificity and grounded actuality. Persons are actual, but personas are virtual. Such virtualism masks the reproduction of inequalities by performing change that cannot actually happen.

40   Keith Murphy, "A Cultural Geometry: Designing Political Things in Sweden," *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 1 (2013): 118–31.

41   James G. Carrier and Daniel Miller, *Virtualism: A New Political Economy* (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

42   Ahmed Ansari, "Politics and Method," Modes of Criticism 2, 2016, http://modesofcriticism.org/politics-method (accessed April 15, 2019).

This question of virtualism brings the argument back to the structural issues of social design discussed in the previous section. Given the unstable professional identity of design and the constantly unfolding and changing contexts of its practice, how is the professional social designer's legitimacy established? And how does this creation of authority also create blockages in engaging with issues of inequality?

The performance of being a social designer through tool-kits, Post-it layouts, and so on also embeds a level of authority in the precarious professional context. These tools impose an image of expert knowledge that becomes social designers' frontline asset. This apparent expertise validates an image of professionalism, attempting to give it authority. However, it also provides a kind of "*explicit* meta-language" that negotiates and even bargains for a level of value and recognition.[43]

This situation arises, in particular, where the value or impact of a proposed intervention is opaque. Here, virtualism undertakes two complementary functions. One is in appearing to bind the design process to a wider identity of professional norms—although one that is very new and under constant reconfiguration. The other is in claiming an epistemological territory over the design context to hand—or, more prosaically, impressing the client by abstracting the context and its respective issues into a neater visual framework.

**Discussion**
We have argued that as currently configured, social design practice is destined not to tackle the causes and consequences of inequalities, even while being enrolled in social change and policy development. We have noted that aspects of the neoliberal condition, such as precarity and the institutional location of social design, constrain the potential for significant change. We have also argued that the everyday practices of social design play out a performative mode of innovation, making constant adjustments to current systems that are virtual, not actual. Even if an individual designer is motivated to challenge inequality and has some agency as a consultant to do so, the institutional logics of the design profession and client organizations serve to reproduce inequalities.

These circumstances result from five factors: from professional design's location, operating in a service mode within neoliberalism; from the lack of developed accountability devices and mechanisms to govern practice in relation to social issues; from design's limited sense of itself as a public profession; from material practices that occur in a virtual, rather than an actual, mode; and from limited possibilities for reflexivity. There are potential ways forward, however. We identify three possibilities here.

43  Webb Keane, "Market, Materiality and Moral Metalanguage," *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 1 (2008): 27–42.

First, opportunities emerge from critically examining these locations and characteristics to develop a reflexive professional practice. This means going beyond "ethical codes" to building devices, processes and infrastructures for professional governance, making social designers accountable to their publics. Turning a critical lens on the conditions and contexts in which design professions and competences have emerged, both historically and geographically, can aid in understanding the potential for, and limits of, social design practice as it is being used to address inequalities. Examples of related agendas are echoed in the calls for research-led design education, informed by a re-invigorated design studies discipline,[44] and calls for a political agenda for design that enables transitions to sustainable futures.[45] Developing an institutional critique of social design practice and recognizing the embeddedness of design practices in neoliberal systems can lead to careful analysis of the conditions of inequalities, and the related social and policy challenges that can feasibly be addressed through social designing. Such insights can inform the devices, mechanisms, and institutional configurations through which social design can be developed and governed to become a reflexive profession and body of knowledge.

Second, we see opportunities to work in ways other than in the conventional client–designer dyad (whether internal service provider or external consultant) associated with industrial, product, and digital design. In social designing, designers don't have to have a stake (merely) as designers; they can be public servants, politicians, public service employees, participants in movements, or citizens, whose stakes in actualities both precede and continue after a change project. While each of these roles and identities brings its own challenges in relation to the potential for understanding and addressing inequalities, they require having an embodied and reflexive knowledge of professional norms within and across institutions. This involves also recognizing the diverse spatialities and temporalities that are at play in the outcomes of designing and examining how responsibilities for these outcomes are identified, negotiated, and assessed.

Third, we see opportunities for constructing inventive methods to bring the structuring of inequalities into view, potentially replacing virtualism with actualism.[46] Instead of user journey maps that communicate experiences, there might be devices that reveal and intervene in how inequalities are constituted and in the discourses and institutional logics that reproduce them. Such developments can benefit from related discussions that seek to shift research into change, often fusing design with social and policy research.[47]

44  Cameron Tonkinwise, "Design Studies—What Is It Good For?," *Design and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2015): 5–43. DOI: 10.2752/175470814X13823675225036.

45  Terry Irwin, "Transition Design: A Proposal for a New Area of Design Practice, Study, and Research, Design and Culture," *Design and Culture* 7, no. 2, (2015): 229–46. DOI: 10.1080/17547075.2015.1051829.

46  Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford, eds., *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); and Noortje Marres et al., eds., *Inventive Social Research* (Manchester: Mattering Press, 2018).

47  See, e.g., Bruno Latour, "A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)" (Keynote lecture, *Networks of Design Meeting of the Design History Society,* Falmouth, Cornwall, September 3, 2008).

In short, we have argued that neoliberalism requires inequalities and that social design's institutional location limits its capacity to address them. We hope that social design can tackle inequalities. However, this requires recognizing and changing how this emerging profession is structured and performed.