



DESIGN (&) ACTIVISM

PERSPECTIVES ON DESIGN AS ACTIVISM
AND ACTIVISM AS DESIGN

Edited by Tom Bieling

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“Whenever anyone asks why I am so passionate about activism,
I ask them to consider the alternative: passivity.”

Anita Roddick 2001, XIX





CAN DESIGN EVER BE ACTIVIST?

THE CHALLENGE OF ENGAGING NEOLIBERALISM DIFFERENTLY

Guy Julier

While its effects continue to unfold, the economic crisis of 2008 was a watershed moment for design activism. It was swept along by the activities of the Occupy Movement, including Occupy Design or the horizontalist actions in recession struck countries such as Spain and Greece. Meanwhile a number of academics attempted to provide re-framings for design practice and education (Fry 2008; Fuad-Luke 2009; Julier 2013; Thorpe 2012). These challenges to design sought alternative pathways that took it out of its historical service to industry.

In the meantime, neoliberal economics has stumbled on, perhaps in a zombie state (Harman 2010), but nonetheless it has continued to dominate and guide politics, society culture and everyday life, as if there was no alternative. The rise of populist politics, embodied, for example, by President Trump and or in the Brexit process from 2016, while claiming some form of alternative perspective, nonetheless embeds these even deeper into logics of individualism, endless economic growth and competitiveness – hallmarks of neoliberalism. Twitching and dribbling, though it may be, neoliberalism doesn't want to die off. And yet, commentators and institutions from the hard left through to the liberal right have warned of its unsustainability as a system. From its unhappiness-inducing individualism (Davies 2015) to its clear impact on global warming (Parr 2015) to the mere suggestion that wage inequality in fact stagnates growth (Swanson and Tankersley 2017), it surely should mean 'game over' for neoliberalism.

If we have zombie capitalism, then we also have zombie design. This is because design is the darling of neoliberalism. One need only track its inexorable rise since the 1980s against the rise of some of neoliberalism's key features to make the connection. The speeding-up of supply chains alongside flexible accumulation, the growth of intellectual property rights (IPR) in the competition of monopolies, the production of rational landscapes as part of the privatisation of spaces, the co-option of the commons into rent-producing assets, progressive outsourcing of public welfare services. All these express the material effects of neoliberalism's processes of deregulation, New Economy, financialization and austerity. And design does much, if not most, of the work of this alchemy.

The sheer weight of numbers suggests that there is no room left for manoeuvre. The countless reports that extoll the contributions that design in the creative



industries makes to GDP suggest that There Is No Alternative: that the success of design and being successful as a designer is always going to be tied to a growth-based, capitalist economy of competitiveness in which differentiating products, spaces and services is the core *raison d'être*.

Design and neoliberalism are good together not just because the latter provides plenty of work for the former, though. Design is also active in formatting particular dispositions, practices and structures of capitalism. It is not just a marriage built on economic arrangements, but a meaningful love affair.

But what can be done if we want to re-boot that relationship? How might we recast that nexus of culture and economy where design becomes the active agent in new forms of everyday life that are more compelling in their environmentalism, concern for social justice and empathy for changing demographic circumstances? Can design ever be activist?

This chapter starts from a position that, first of all, we have to understand the tricky processes of neoliberalisation and its continuing unfolding in order to then build design tactics toward a postcapitalist order. This is largely a pessimistic analysis, for as we begin to understand neoliberalism, so we see how it presents a moving subject that continually draws in its edges.

The story could have a happy ending, though. Through understanding these, some level of self-realisation might arise. And from this, perhaps a new, resilient and reflexive form of design could develop that moves beyond the porous, yet distinct parameters of neoliberalism.

The Co-Option of Design Activism

It seems that no matter how much design tries to break out of its abusive relationship with neoliberalism, it gets sucked back in. Or, rather, neoliberalism catches up with it to smother the life out any attempt at living on its own terms.

Neoliberalism is better understood as neoliberalisation. It involves continual processes of transformation: of individuals, of social relationships, of markets and of spaces. Design is an instrument of those transformations. At one level, it repositions and re-organises matter to become neoliberal-friendly. But it also plays a strategic role in brokering change. It plays some of the role of softening consumers up for further change, making it appear 'reasonable'.

It is as subtle as it is pernicious. Those appealing, soft qualities are drawn in part from the experiments of counter cultural activities, if we are to follow Boltanski and Chappiello (2006). It is where the rhetoric of 'non-hierarchical, flat management', and 'the buzz' of creative work reside. It is where immaterial labour is presented as a lifestyle option, where the divisions between work and play are eroded.

The erosion of divisions is a key trope in processes of neoliberalisation. In this, it is parasitical, attaching to a variety of localised contexts as a transformatory process rather than an end. Thus its constant appropriation and reworking of activist initiatives is at work. Berglund (2013) explains how design activist initiatives – such

as alternative food networks – get co-opted into city branding and creative city discourses, demonstrating ‘edginess’ and cultural capital to attract inward investment. Mould (2014) demonstrates how urban interventions of activists – such as guerrilla gardening or pop-up street benches – soon get framed as regeneration that in turn leads to gentrification. Valenzuela and Böhm (2017) argue that attempts to rebuild and reform economies towards more environmentally sustainable approaches – more specifically the promotion of circular economy – end up in the de-politicization of such efforts.

It seems to be an abusive relationship, then. In one way, designers continually fulfill the neoliberalism’s appetite for the new, for something radical and edgy. That’s how they get noticed. But they also get ignored in that the rewards make them think ‘was that worth it?’. For example, in a survey of 576 people working in design in the UK in 2013, 85.6% said that ‘clients expect more work for less money’, around two thirds of respondents agreed that ‘agencies are using more freelancers’ (68.1%) and about two fifths (42.5%) agreed that ‘agencies are using more unpaid interns’ (Design Industry Voices 2013).

They then try and break out. Do something more transgressive. A bit of activism might shake things up, they think. But then neoliberal forces draw designers back in, offering some kind of security, albeit a temporary arrangement.

A bit of relationship counseling is needed here. What are designers doing to keep neoliberalism so self-satisfied? Designers’ role in this is threefold: **first it their relentlessly fashions objects that discipline subjects into neoliberalism’s orbit;** second, in engaging with the financialist logics of neoliberalism design conspires, quite literally, to forms of future value; third, its fashioning of intensities continually closes down possibilities for alternative possibilities. An understanding of these may lead to some points of exit from this current, unhappy relationship, though.

Neoliberal Objects

Designers do the cooking for neoliberalism. They don’t do the clearing up afterwards, but they do serve up its meals, try out new recipes and make the next one something to be looked forward to. In this, they also fashion the objects that energize the rest of the family, keeping it disciplined and compliant with the father figure of neoliberalism. Briefly, what does this father figure stand for? Four things:

- the *deregulation* of markets and privileging of market forces, free of state intervention;

- the *privatisation* of state-owned enterprises and state services such as education, welfare and security;

- the foregrounding of *financial* interests over others such as societal, or environmental ones;

- an emphasis on *competitiveness* and on *individual, entrepreneurial* practices and outlooks.

One might observe that these have been key features of capitalism in general. What makes these characteristics *neoliberal* as opposed to merely liberal? William Davies succinctly observes that “the neo-liberal [*sic*] challenge was to invent instruments and mechanisms which made the philosophy secure” (Davies 2012, 770). For the purposes of this chapter, one might take this very literally. Prior to the 1980s, full marketization and privatization was perhaps more of a political aspiration of the right and centre-right. The neoliberal order put in place not only laws and policies to ensure its dominance in the global north, but also specific material objects and systems that made it happen, from the macro-level of finance to the micro-level of individual thought and action.

Thus, if these features appear to be distant from everyday life, then it is as well to remember that social reproduction has to take place in order to undergird these. People have to be disciplined into undertaking the work that fulfils these aims. This is not just a case of turning up at the office on a Monday morning or going to the shopping mall on a Saturday. It is about a wholesale fashioning of the self to be compliant with neoliberalism’s processes. Foucault (2008) expressed this disciplining process in terms of biopolitics – the wiring of power into the body.

Specific designed objects play their roles in this. Gadgets, particularly those that involve elements of quantification such as video games, personal organisers or sports apps, are mobilized in producing practices of calculation and anticipation (Ash 2015; Väliäho 2014). Just as neoliberalism requires us to constantly work out (our) value, so we are also engaged in the expectation of its near change and in preparing for that. Value *in potentia* is germane to both neoliberalism and design.

Thrift (2008) pays attention to what he calls the micro-biopolitics of contemporary life: small gestures and moments of cognition that we have adopted. These are: the prosthesis for cognitive assistance (think: Google maps on a smartphone); provisional spatial coordination (think: continual tracking of parcel delivery); continual access to information (think: newsfeeds at railway stations and in airports); an opening up of metrics (think: the multiple measurement systems in exercise apps); that places are less places of return (think: continual adjustments of supermarket aisles or updating of smartphone apps). All these examples are objects of design that point to the production of neoliberal subjects as competitive, rational, calculative, entrepreneurial, self-caring, choosing, networking actors (otherwise, *homo economicus*) (Verdouw 2016) or as insecure, confused and debilitated individuals (Chandler and Reid 2017).

Design isn’t just producing objects. It’s creating dispositions, ways of being, neural pathways and somatic memory. For the last 30 years these have almost exclusively been those that are concurrent with capitalist living. What objects might we design that produce alternative dispositions? And which of these alternative dispositions might resist, fully or partially, co-option? Or if neoliberal objects live on, despite the failure of the neoliberal project, how do we kill these zombies off? Can something else be cooked up? Can the table be laid differently?

Financialized Objects

Not all objects are what they seem. They act as deep wells of investment and/or instruments of finance. As such they participate in processes of financialization, an activity that has come to represent the leading edge of neoliberalism since 2000. In short, we may typify financialization by a greater emphasis on strategies to maintain value of shares, brands, real estate and capital flows. This means: the dominance of shareholder value within corporate governance; the pursuit of profit through financial rather than commodity production systems; the rise of financial trading.

Of the latter let us consider, for example, the Chinese bike rental firm Mobike. With 7 million bikes and around 100 million users, it requires a surety of 299 yuan (\$45) from each user. This totals 30 billion yuan (\$4.5b) that Mobike is then able to use as venture capital (Culpan 2017). Thus the objects – the bikes, that is – become ways by which money is gathered to be pushed into rentier financial flows. The existence of the bikes and, of course, their supporting infrastructure fulfill transport needs but also create a market. However, in turn, each participant in this new market, probably unwittingly, provides capital for Mobike to do other things. Similarly, and more generally, Sassen (2003) observes that a building is a security that allows finance to be gathered to then be invested elsewhere. Finance produces materialisations as materialisations lead to further financial recreation in a seemingly endless cycle.

As deep wells of finance, we may also consider the notion of spatial and technological fixes (Harvey 1989; 2001) and design's role in this process. Consider the \$25 trillion held in pension funds in OECD countries (OECD 2015) or the €68 trillion of capital (derived through institutional investors and household bank accounts) that is dealt with by asset managers globally (EFAMA 2017). The point of such investments is to make profit. In order to make profit these investments have to go somewhere. Shopping malls, leisure attractions, hospitality offers, office developments and many other design-intense materialisations provide spatial fixes for this capital – somewhere for it to go. Another form of spatial fix is in the establishment, development and disciplining of new market opportunities, for example, in the global South. Technological fixes such as new forms of computer hardware or software, driverless cars or artificial intelligence provide other investment opportunities. The world is awash with money and, presently, we have to make places for it to go.

The logic here is **in** the continual search for sources of future value (Lash 2010) Design is wrapped into this process. It both fashions and points to these sources. Thus it is important not merely to view the economic role of design as a way of stimulating private consumption and the production of disposable products. This is where critiques of design have traditionally been placed, it seems (e.g. Crocker 2017). A key point of reference that takes us beyond this traditional view of design is Thomas Piketty's argument that through much of the twentieth century and

increasingly into the twenty-first, return on finance has outstripped return on production in capitalist economies (Piketty 2014). Instead, therefore, we might view design within a wider field of financial circulation and value. At one level design provides nodes where finance is lodged, structuring these in such a ways to allow for returns on these investments. At another, it uses cultural value to increase the perceived attraction of such nodes. Thus, the use of place-branding to make a city attractive for inward investment, the establishment of an iconic building or piece of infrastructure such as a designerly bridge to support regeneration, and thus property values, or the re-design of a mobile phone ahead of a shareholders' annual general meeting (Aspara 2010; 2012) are some of the ways by which design takes on this secondary, financialist role.

Design Intensities

Within this financialist role we see design as the key factor in the creation of many different kinds of intensities for the logic of capital within neoliberalism. Here, design has not only acted as an instrument for fiat money but has shaped the pathways by which this process takes place.

In this, we note how design intensities act as points of value *in potentia*. They are where the possibility of future profit is based on the creation and protection of detailed and carefully planned and resolved forms of private property, be this intellectual or material. In effect, these are, as Lash (2010) notes, becomings. They are in constant states of development and roll-out: unfinished objects, as it were (Knorr Cetina 2001). Intensities become extensities as they are deployed into the marketplace. Brand signatures are applied to ranges of consumer goods. Franchise concepts are established in multiple high streets or as services through their licensee workers. While being individually designed and controlled, networks of shopping centres are held by property development companies, both as nodes in flows of capital but also as sources of market information, for instance. The table below expands on this idea through some examples.

design intensity example	some neoliberal effects
brand guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • internal disciplining of employees into corporate culture; • brand valuation aiding shareholder value; • brand roll-out leveraging new markets.
creative quarters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positions urban centres as innovation hubs to attract investment and more creative capital; • increases property values and acts as regeneration tool; • disciplines 'culture of innovation'.

franchise concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • licensing of intellectual property and material content to franchisees creates product and service monopolies; • investment can be put into concept development and marketing rather than full infrastructure (the latter borne by the franchisee instead).
global corporate design headquarters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supports brand image and thus shareholder value; • leverages local resources (e.g. creative capital and milieu, tax breaks).
intellectual property rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maintains monopoly over design or invention; • licensing to third party producers.
movie franchises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • metadata licensed to third parties e.g. merchandise; • monopoly through IPR and metadata disciplines production network, including individual creative workers, to dominance of majors (little room for independent work, therefore).
prototypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • materialisations based on high quality market information for testing profit potential.
shopping centres, hotels, leisure parks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bounded, controlled spaces configured to create market demand and ensure steady return on investment, particularly interesting to institutional investors; • nodes for securitizing finance and moving it globally.
software programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high value in prototyping and development; • marketplace becomes investment-free testbed; • licensing is source of profit with very low serial reproduction costs.
tax havens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • important nodes in tax avoidance and global circulation of capital, designed to be attractive to wealthy and as easy places for obfuscation and concealment.

Table 2: Design intensities (becomings) that lead to extensities (beings).

Design might be considered as something that is put into a pre-existing object, that is the fashioning of something to stimulate markets and consumption – sometimes referred to as ‘value-added’. But here I want to push an idea that it is at the core of neoliberal systems of value creation through monopolies, the control of markets and disciplining. In this, orthodoxies are formed that either squeeze alternatives out or co-opt them in. As spatial or technological fixes, they provide points of focus for capital to be concentrated. Subsequently, their roll-out as extensities can be carefully measured and monitored in service of the investor class.

Fuck Neoliberalism

By shifting our point of reference of design from production to finance, we begin to see more acutely how it works within and at the service of neoliberalism, and how the rise of the two have gone hand-in-hand. Equally, by shifting design activism from ordinary points of everyday intervention and thinking more contextually about how neoliberalism functions through design, we might find some lines of attack. By asking, quite simply, ‘what are we up against?’, we can begin to understand the enemy. This then gives us a map through which may begin to see what, as activists who truly want to ‘fuck neoliberalism’ (Springer 2016). It might tell us how, despite all the best efforts of design interventions to disrupt, model alternatives and pre-figuratively explore other possibilities, we don’t seem to be getting there fast enough. Design and neoliberalism is in a constant and self-perpetuating circularity.

Neoliberal objects **shape** particular dispositions **for** operating under capitalism, where fiat money dominates and the securitization of individual lives requires acquiescence to certain modes of thought and action based on continual anticipation and calculation. Financialized objects provide an overarching, materialized logic and structure for the movement of capital, seeking sources of value. Design intensities are fashioned for the concentration of capital, the point of alchemy where, through their translation into extensities, profit is produced.

These processes are secured through law, but also through their very refined qualities that make them difficult to assail. And this gives them their supposed resilience. At the same time, their continually unfolding, developmental and unfinished qualities keeps them moving and their borders flexible. It is this mixture of rigidity (power) and elasticity (dodging and weaving) that keeps the processes of neoliberalization just out of reach, just beyond being challenged and possibility defeated.

Machiavelli wrote in *The Prince*, “People should either be caressed or crushed. If you do them minor damage they will get their revenge; but if you cripple them there is nothing they can do. If you need to injure someone, do it in such a way that you do not have to fear their vengeance” (Machiavelli in Wootton 1996: 12). However, if we are to personify neoliberalism and design, such a bloody ending for either is probably not possible nor desirable. Instead, perhaps this abusive relationship can be healed through some gentle therapy. Through this, the benefits of change may surface. But it also requires revealing and articulating how they both got into this mess.

Design activism may therefore be a process of discovery and description of the ways by which neoliberalism and design are acting on one another. How are they relational? How are the objects of design producing neoliberal subjects? And how might we undo this coding? Where are the key design points of financialization and how might we replace their logics while safeguarding security and welfare? How are design intensities disciplining particular commercial arrangements, leading to exploitation and suppressing creative action outside these? How do we work successfully outside these intensities and their extensities to create another world? These are some of the urgent questions we might be asking.

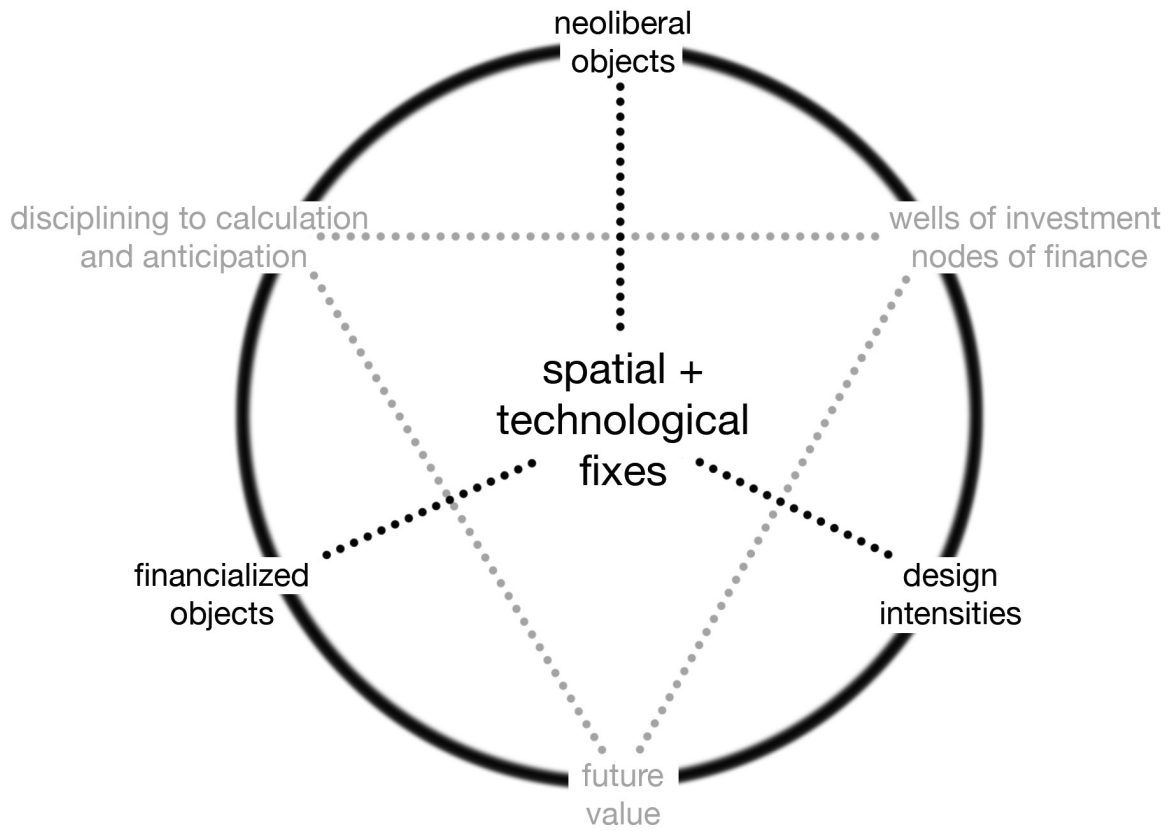


Figure 12: The interplay of neoliberalism and design in the context of financialization.

It seems, however, that it has only been when the financialist logic of neoliberalism falters, as it did in 2008, that chinks and fissures open up to explore them. Crisis sometimes offers opportunities. Neoliberal forces are very adept at exploiting these as we saw with the triumph of quantitative easing following 2008 or the advantages that natural disaster and war have offered (Klein 2007). Design activists might consider getting in their first, however, building their own reflexive processes where what has happened and what is happening is laid bare. Tactics for their own resilience and flexibility might be created and maintained. This is where neoliberalism might be engaged differently.

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