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NORDES 2021

12 PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL DESIGN



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ABSTRACT

The goal of this workshop is to facilitate a rich discussion of the field of social design, which is increasingly becoming a contested space. To support this, we have drafted ‘12 Principles of Social Design’, which we want to share with the NORDES community as a starting point for an open conversation about the goals of social design as an area of academic inquiry and a field of reflective practice. Our plan for the workshop is to have a discursive structure that allows us to dig deeper into the Principles and the issues that sit behind them. Participants will be invited to bring their own case studies to see how the Principles perform against practice. The workshop will thus be used to test the principles and improve them, to build and strengthen the connections between design researchers working in this area, and ultimately to influence the direction of social design.

INTRODUCTION

In the design research literature, there have been productive intersections between studies of design and work in the social sciences. This has included using concepts from social science to analyse what happens in

designing, including the construction of new ‘socials’. Researchers have analysed the social in design (Keshavarz, 2018), different socials operating in design (Tonkiss, 2017) and used concepts from social research such as ‘infrastructuring’ (e.g. Björgvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren, 2010) or ‘institutional logics’ (e.g. Arico, 2018).

In regard to explicitly ‘social design’, Koskinen and Hush (2016) characterised different types of social design as molecular (small-scale), utopian and sociological. Others noted that social design practice may be optimised to ‘work’ at smaller scales (Chen et al 2015). Tonkinwise (2019) mapped out several ways that the ‘social’ is activated in research and practice in social design. Some researchers have highlighted the conditions in which social design has emerged. Julier (2017) pointed to the conditions shaping ongoing developments in design such as neo-liberalism. Kaszynska (2021) distinguished between different genealogies in social design. Building on research in service design, Kimbell (2021) argued that versions of social design practice exist within distinct institutional logics. In reviewing this emerging literature, we note a lack of coherence in defining the social, a focus on the methods for operating on the social, a normative intent to change the social world in particular directions, and evidence of reflexive, critical and historical perspectives to account for social design’s emergence and consequences.

The ambiguity over what is meant by the social may be holding social design back. The problem is that the word ‘social’ seems, on one hand, to imply physical proximity and conviviality with others - something that design in the last decades has increasingly been successful in supporting via participatory and co-design. Yet on the other hand, ‘social’ also invokes a language of sociology and institutional structures that invites a

bird's eye view on society as an organism that has its own structure. In this sense the problem of social design is a matter of scale in terms of how to reconcile these different notions of social scale within design practice.

So far, the most successful way of cutting through this scale problem has been the 'sociology of associations' (Latour, 2005), also known as Actor-Network Theory, which offers a concept of the social that is made up of both humans and nonhumans and collapses notions of micro and macro scale (Callon & Latour, 1981). This socio-material approach has been popular with design theorists such as Binder et al (2011) who propose design as the making of socio-material 'design things'. Yet it has proved difficult to embed them within everyday social design practices. One of the challenges seems to be that much of the world is caught in rigid scalar distinctions that focus on either human-centred design or on institutional framings of systems as technocratic entities. How can those advocating and developing social design practices engage meaningfully with these tensions of socio-material rhetoric and mundane institutional practices?

To address this challenge, we propose a workshop in which we offer 12 principles as a starting point for an open discussion about social design. We are academics involved in social design research and practice who are members of the Social Design Institute at the University of the Arts London. We have a number of motivations for this workshop: to nurture a social design field of inquiry; to support and regulate the development of design practice; to enable practitioners to understand, assess and critically reflect on their practice; to open up dialogues and build connections with colleagues; and to support teaching and learning. We have an online version of the principles that anyone is invited to edit and improve, share thoughts and offer counterarguments.

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The first draft of the Principles are as follows:

12 PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL DESIGN

This series of principles defines what social design 'is' and, in our opinion, what it should 'be'. The current 12 principles are divided into four areas.

THE SOCIAL AS AN OBJECT OF DESIGN

1. Social Design claims there is a distinct 'social' that is made through and with things.
2. Social Design acknowledges that there are many possible ways of operating on the social.
3. Social Design claims a hybrid space of social practice between technical systems and human-centred design.

METHODS AND PRACTICES

4. Social Design is an anticipatory socio-material practice that proceeds through intervening into and reconfiguring sites and worlds.
5. Social Design engages multiple perspectives, knowledges, and disciplines: no single one has a privileged methodology for operating on the social.
6. Social Design shifts and translates across object and planetary scales, domains and sites.

NORMATIVE INTENT

7. Social Design is underpinned by normative intentions and undertaken with a view to creating social transformation.
8. Social Design forms issue-publics by creating shared, open-ended endeavours with communities through collective discussion about purposes, needs, values, and consequences.
9. Social Design builds new forms of democratic relations between places, living beings and things.

CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY

10. Social Design problematises the traditional modes and historical achievements of professional design, its Eurocentric assumptions, and its racialised and unequal consequences.
11. Social Design tries to mitigate against the unintended and damaging outcomes of designing.
12. Social Design is critically aware of its political, systemic, institutional and environmental situatedness.

We would like to invite colleagues with a common interest in social design as a field of practice and research to join us and share their perspectives on what social design is, could be and should be. As well as participating in an intervention that aims to influence the direction of travel and development of this field of research and practice, the workshop also represents an opportunity to build and strengthen relationships among a network of social design researchers. During the workshop we will discuss, challenge and iterate the principles together, test them against participants'

project examples, and end with a reflective discussion about the nature of – and rationale for – definitional work such as this. Following the workshop we will invite contributions for a special issue on defining social design.

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