

Emerging Design Practices and the Future of Design

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What follows is a highly partial account of a number of developments within some fields of professional design over the past few decades with a focus on Western Europe and North America. It would be foolish, and dishonest, to characterise this as anything other than a very personal list of key moments that represent some of the projects, publications and events to which I have attended which I believe are relevant to discussion at this workshop.

By design practices I mean the doings and sayings of people who refer to themselves as designers and think of their work as design. I distinguish between several design professions and fields such as architecture, primarily concerned with the built environment, and engineering, both of which have strong professional institutions and legitimising processes, and the design fields that often are taught and practiced within the art-school tradition of creative inquiry, which do not have strong authorising practices to identify who is a member of the community and who may practice and who may not. Such design schools are often located outside of universities although in the UK they have been part of universities since 1992. Such design schools will often offer courses in communication and graphic design, product and industrial design, jewelry, fashion, interior design, digital and interaction design, service design and design management. Within the publications, websites and conversations among these practitioners you will find terms such as user-centred design, experience design, participatory design, transdisciplinary design, post-disciplinary design, design for sustainability, and inclusive design. Design is clearly not a unified field, or a single profession, but rather is identifiable as a heterogeneous group of practices which have been changing in the past decade and which will continue to change.

Below I present a selective account of where some of the concepts related to these practices have emerged and where they have been mobilized, mostly focussing on the past decade as it pertains to this workshop in ways which will become clear. It is selective in the sense that it is shaped by my own trajectory from arts practitioner to designer of interactions to educator to researcher working in a

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social science institution, with a focus on the UK since this is where I live and the professional context in which I am most engaged. In particular I attend to the development of dialogues between social and cultural researchers, especially ethnographers, and designers, within organizational contexts (sometimes called anthrodesign), and the development of a new field called service design. Then I offer a brief list of some of the issues that I see in these fields relevant both to the question of strategic design and public policy, and to the future of design.

... Skipping past Plato and Aristotle...

- Roman era—Vitruvius, a military engineer, writes what are now called the Ten Books of Architecture, defining good building design as combining *firmitas* (solidity), *commoditas* (usefulness) and *venustas* (beauty).
- 1837—The Government School of Design is founded in London, England, which later develops into the Royal College of Art, combining both fine arts and design and with links to industry and commerce.
- 1919—Architect Walter Gropius sets up the Bauhaus, a new design school in Weimer, Germany, that aims to integrate the craftsman and the artist, with an emphasis on a foundational education for designers and high-end functional products, but also links to Modernism and Expressionism.
- 1950—Industrial designer Henry Dreyfus publishes an article in *Harvard Business Review* that argues that the role of design is to boost sales and profits.
- 1976—London Business School starts teaching design on the MBA.
- 1980s—With the economic boom there is a growth in design consultancy services with a focus on industrial and product design and branding.
- 1987—Anthropologist Lucy Suchman's *Plans and Situated Actions* is published, drawing on her experience of working at the Xerox PARC research centre, exploring the relation of knowledge and action to the particular circumstances in which knowing and acting occur.
- 1988—Psychologist Donald Norman's *The Psychology of Everyday Things* is published, which leads towards a new focus on user-centred design.
- 1990s—Web design emerges as a new multidisciplinary field, and practitioners start to discuss designing experiences.
- 1990—The first Participatory Design conference is held, bringing together researchers from several fields especially social scientists working in information technology and human-computer interaction.
- late 1990s—The web consultancy E-lab includes both anthropologists and designers in its teams and develops a framework to integrate their work by trying to understand an end user's actions, environment, interactions, objects and understanding (AEIOU).
- 1997—Intel Research sets up the People and Practices Research Group with both anthropologists and designers in the team.

- 1999—Product design and innovation consultancy IDEO designs the new Amtrak Acela service, focussing not just on the carriage but also the 10 steps they identify in the customer journey.
- 1999—Bill Gaver, Tony Dunne and Elena Pacenti introduce the concept of a new design research method called a “cultural probe”, the intention behind which is not to gather data but to inspire designers.
- 2001—Service design consultancy live|work is founded in London.
- 2002—Weatherhead School of Management hosts a conference called Managing as Designing, bringing together social scientists, management scholars, managers, designers and artists to explore the potential of this metaphor.
- 2002—Squires and Byrne’s *Creating Breakthrough Product Ideas: The Collaboration of Anthropologists and Designers in the Product Development Industry* is published including contributions from and discussion of social science practitioners involved in design.
- 2004—The UK Design Council sets up a research unit called RED, to tackle social and economic issues through design-led innovation.
- 2005—The first Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) is held supported by Intel and Microsoft.
- 2005—In the UK the National Health Service Institute for Innovation and Improvement hires design consultancy ThinkPublic to help re-design of a cancer service. Their participative, visual, narrative-based approach is named experience-based design a later (2007) book by Paul Bate and Glenn Robert.
- 2006—UK think-tank Demos and the UK Design Council’s RED both publish papers on service design.
- 2006—IDEO co-founder Bill Moggridge’s book *Designing Interactions* includes a chapter on service design.
- 2006—International Service Design conference at Northumbria University, UK.
- 2007—The Design Council and a regional development agency in the North East of England launch Design of the Times (DOTT), a one-year project bringing design-based approaches to projects that aim to increase sustainability in the region.
- 2007—Mindlab, a cross-ministerial innovation unit in Denmark, is established with the aim of using design approaches to involve citizens and policymakers in innovation.
- 2007—In the UK Kent County Council works with design consultancy Engine to create a Social Innovation Lab for Kent (SILK).
- 2008—In the UK consultancy Participle (formed by members of the Design Council’s RED unit) launches Southwark Circle with the London Borough of Southwark, a new venture co-designed and co-produced with over 50s.
- 2008—First Service Design Network Conference.

- 2009—IDEO and the Gates Foundation publish a Human-Centred Design Toolkit for NGOs.
- 2009—Melissa Cefkin, an anthropologist at IBM, edits *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter*.
- 2009—First Nordic Conference on Service Design and Service Innovation (ServDes).
- 2010—The UK Design Council and the County of Cornwall launch DOTT Cornwall, a year-long series of design-led, highly participative projects in Cornwall.
- 2010—Intel’s People and Practices Research group publish a social viability measurement tool for technology projects.
- 2010—UNIDIR hosts the Strategic Design and Public Policy workshop, Glen Cove.

These days if you go into a design consultancy, you will probably find cultural anthropologists on staff and designers of various kinds conducting research and you will hear the claim that the research findings and “insights” generated lead, shape or inform the a design of a service or product. The nature of that data gathering and analysis, and the ways these are understood, however, vary enormously. The disciplinary and educational backgrounds of members of such teams mean that establishing what is or could be known is a contested area.

A number of issues emerge, of which I list five here.

1. In the shift from user-centred (product) design to anthrodesign and designing services, and a move among some practitioners from designing *for* users to designing *with* them, important questions emerge about how those leading a design process mobilize others to participate and to what end. How do social science traditions that query power relations, for example, engage with designerly intentions to get as many people as possible involved for reasons of legitimacy, curiosity or inspiration? Given limited resources, who decides who to engage, why them, how and to what effect?
2. Understandings of ethnography may vary, but when ethnography is reduced to data collection ignoring its analytical intent, what else is going on in a design process that claims to have gathered ethnographic data as a basis for doing design work? Do designers creating novel research methods think they are getting at what Geertz called the “really real”? What happens when researchers who think data are real, are confronted on teams with other researchers for whom knowledge about community or user needs is understood as interpreted or constructed?
3. If some designers have shifted from thinking of the objects of design work as experiences, interactions, and services, privileging a notion of immateriality and downplaying the material, what exactly is being designed? If the object of design is now social action, how do professional designers’ historical emphasis on material objects shape how they approach such designing? How do social scientific concepts and theories intersect with policymakers’ and designers’ intentions to change things?
4. What kinds of boundary objects do multidisciplinary teams create when they work together during design? What do such artefacts do and how? What boundary objects

might be needed for the various constituencies involved in the design of public policy?

5. Turning an anthropological lens on designers' practices, what do designers and researchers educated within design schools and part of self-conscious design communities do? What do they attend to and how might this be understood? If novelty, aesthetics, self-expression, attention to physical form shape the practices of many designers, what might this mean for the design of public policy?

To conclude, the collaboration between cultural research and professional design, as part of an agenda to bring local knowledge to local action, is not a simple matter but there are several practice and research communities who have something to offer this emerging conversation. A great deal has happened in the past decade or so. Policymakers may shy away from engaging with these practices, but they will find that some designers and cultural researchers moving into their territory. Designers of services and social enterprises, in particular, are already designing social action and in some cases are concerned with re-making public policy. A question for policymakers is then what might be costs of not engaging with these ways of working?

Selected references

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Selected web and email resources

DOTT Cornwall—<http://www.dottcornwall.com/>

EPIC 2010—<http://www.epiconference.com/epic2010/submissions>

IXDA Interaction Design Conference 2011—<http://www.ixda.org/conference>

Participatory Design Conference 2010—<http://www.pdc2010.org>

ServDes 2010—<http://www.servdes.org/>

Anthrodesign list—anthrodesign@yahoogroups.com

PHD design list—<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?Ao=PHD-DESIGN>

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