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## AN ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCE OF DESIGN ACTIVISM AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE DESIGN APPROACHES ON DESIGN EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

*Emergence of the new social, political and environmental paradigms in the recent decades empowered design activism and socially responsible design approaches. Similarly there is an increase in the related academic studies and the practical applications of these approaches especially in the developed countries. The objective of this article is to explore the influences of design activism and socially responsible design approaches on the design education and to observe the common grounds of the programs that consider these approaches in their curriculum. The focus of the study is limited to the review of the second cycle design programs in pioneering institutions of the Western countries where these approaches originated. A comprehensive literature review has been conducted in the design education field about design activism and socially responsible design. Relevant academic programs have been reviewed. The review indicates that design education has some deficiency in terms of social, political, and economic aspects of design. These aspects require specific concentration which cannot be found in the conventional design education. The study reveals that researched programs regard changing social, economic, political and environmental systems and the power of design to play a role in this transformation. Thus these programs are influenced by design activism and socially responsible design approaches implicitly or explicitly.*

*Keywords: Design activism, design education, post-graduate studies, socially responsible design*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The term "Design activism (DA)" became well-known with Victor Papanek and his sensational book *Design for The Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* published in 1971. A large number of academicians and design professionals have shown their interest in DA and this interest has given rise to many different sub-streams since the 1970s. This means that DA is not a new subject within the academia; however it was in the early years of the 21st century when the same interest raised in design industry. Socially responsible design (SRD), on the other hand, is an approach emerged later than DA and shares similar visions.

The objective of this article is to present a number of significant implementations of DA and SRD in design education, and to explore the common grounds and tendencies towards them in the related academic programmes. To do so, this study looks at different perspectives towards DA and SRD and then focuses on relationships between these approaches and their implication in design education. A sample group of second cycle design programs is reviewed. By comparing the programs based on a set of parameters, the study shows how institutions and their programs are influenced by DA and/or SRD.

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## 2 A BRIEF HISTORY, FROM DESIGN ACTIVISM TO SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE DESIGN

There are different terms for the design-related activities that prioritize the social needs. This diversity is often because of various implementations and minor differences in the measures. However, the terms need greater clarification in order to have a better understanding of DA and SRD approaches (Design and Social Impact, 2013).

Design history records important figures that can be seen as examples of activist designers such as John Ruskin, Henry Cole, William Morris, Walter Gropius and Buckminster Fuller, Tomas Maldonado, Victor Papanek and Italian radicals; Superstudio and Archizoom. They endeavored to intervene the reality of their times with their ideals (Julier, 2011). In recessionary moments designers respond to world issues through their profession. Since 2008, the value of DA and social design is increasing in pursuit of designers' commercial and creative survival, as the industry evolves according to the emerging social needs. Thus DA is a prominent topic in the 21st century. (Julier, 2012). The frequency of social and community based design projects is more than trifold of the number in the 1970s (DeVore, 2012). If 1970s is the era of the bloom of DA, 2010s is the era which activist design implications take an important place in the design community.

Richard Buchanan (2001) defines design as a way to provide plans and create humanly shaped products, actions, services and other processes for public and private life in order to create frameworks for human systems to sustain human needs and fulfilments. Also, Oxford English Dictionary (2014) defines activism as "the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change". Even a direct integration of the two definitions can suggest a notion for DA. Various perspectives are examined in order to have a better understanding of the approach.

### 2.1 DESIGN ACTIVISM

Design act is an incisively and designerly interference into people's lives rather than a protest or demonstration like some other political actions. The political potential of design is to increase awareness to alter the existing power and authority while having an aesthetic potential (Markussen, 2013). Victor Papanek (1972) proposes a constant activist behaviour for professional design practice in order to avoid production of excessive and useless products. His so called "activist behaviour" is a call for designers to face the realities of life and act for humanitarian efforts and social concerns. Besides, DA can be defined as an act of developing new processes and artefacts focusing explicitly on social, environmental and political issues without losing the intervention to functionality (Julier, 2013). Furthermore, DA is a way of thinking and practising design to generate a counter discourse against mainstream drivers of the industry that can make a positive social, institutional, economic, and environmental change (Fuad-Luke, 2009).

### 2.2 SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE DESIGN

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Davey et al. (2005) describes SRD as the use of design to address social, environmental, economic and political issues that its interventions move beyond economic considerations to embrace ethical, emotional and humanitarian values.

SRD supports reformist actions instead of orthodox approaches for market profit. The main issues of social responsibility are composed of sustainability, socially responsible decision-making, healthcare, financial exclusion, developing world issues, environmental quality, gender equality, economic vitality, and social inclusion (Davey et al., 2005). Similarly, Guy Bonsiepe (2006) defines another term "design humanism" as design practice to understand the necessities of society and generate feasible, reliable and constructive solutions. Bonsiepe believes that a large segment of society should be able to access the products and services in various areas of everyday life. Therefore designers should pay attention to the needs of excluded, discriminated and economically less-favoured groups which are in fact a vast majority in population (Bonsiepe, 2006).

**2.3 UNDERSTANDING DESIGN ACTIVISM AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE DESIGN**

As an inference of the definitions mentioned, main drivers of DA can be listed as social, political and economic factors. Activist design is an act of generating a broad range of proposals for society. It is relatively more concerned with policies, dynamics of economy and social climate such as consumerism, sustainability, economic contradictions etc. Yet, SRD is mainly driven by ethical, humanitarian issues and benefits of the less-favoured society. Social, environmental and economic issues can be obtained as the basis for both approaches. SRD responds to the defined needs of society such as social discrimination, poverty, insanitation, conservation of natural resources, inequality and less favoured groups of a society. SRD focuses on the needs of the smaller segments of society whereas DA compasses a wider scope which contains the smaller segments. Because DA addresses a wider scope of society, its impact period is longer than SRD activities, which have a narrower scope and direct implementations and outcomes.

	DESIGN ACTIVISM	SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE DESIGN
INFLUENTIAL FACTORS	Social Political Economic	Ethical Humanitarian Less-favoured Society
SCOPE	Wide, society as a whole	Narrow, a specific social segment
IMPACT PERIOD	Long term	Short term

Table 1 – Comparison of DA and SRD

One need to note that both approaches can be applied in various design disciplines with alternative methods. They may seem to overlap in social, environmental and economic issues; however, the difference lies in specifying the society by means of problem identification.

**3 CHANGING ROLE OF DESIGN EDUCATION**

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Design's relationships with other businesses and indeed other academic disciplines are changing. This change should reveal itself in design education too. Qualified designers are needed for efficient activist and socially responsible design practice. It is important to explore the influence of growing activist and socially responsible approaches in design education. According to Findeli (2001) if we accept the fact that the conventional models are no longer able to describe the complexity of design, we are invited to adopt a new model inspired by systems science, complexity theory, and practical philosophy. Szentpeteri (2009) argues that millennium era designers are the witnesses of one of the most radical changes in design history, where pushing the scope of design in a sole field is almost impossible. Services, complex systems, interactions, experiences and processes are integral parts of our environment. Conserving the performance of product development is not enough for today's designers, and they also need to be aware of cultural studies and social science.

Conventional design education has been a matter of debate due to the technological and social changes that affect the society. From this perspective design education is being explicitly questioned. The need of a better design education that can train designers who are able to provide solutions for global issues, fulfil the needs of societies is notably apparent. Today's problems are going to be more complex than before in consequence of contemporary social issues, urban and environmental problems; we are in need of a fresh paradigm for all. Thus a change in design education is inevitable (Allen, 2013). It is impossible that we think about the term "responsible design" without considering "responsible designers". Design education should pay attention to develop the understanding of personal ethics (Findeli, 2001).

As a critique of current state of design education, contemporary designers are required to concentrate on relations between design and society and power of design to transform our environment and society rather than a pursuit for form and function (Allen, 2013). In his much-debated article, Norman (2010) argues the priority of first practitioners of industrial design was physical products whereas today designers work on complex structures, organizations, social matters and they design interactions, services and experiences. Design involves political and social problems, which design education is insufficient for these practices.

In order to overcome the deficiency of design education in facing the contemporary issues, changes in the existing curricula is proposed by several authors; Higher design education institutions should involve more research based design in their curricula and should incorporate theory and practice by bringing social and humanitarian experts into design education (Szentpeteri, 2009); Design education needs to establish a new framework combining knowledge from social sciences, behavioural studies, technology, and business that corresponds with unique requirements of design discipline (Norman, 2010).

#### **4 METHOD AND CASE SELECTION**

To analyse present implementations and influence of DA and SRD in design education this study follows a three step method; case selection, the analysis and interpretation of the results.

A sample group of design education institutions are selected according to three main criteria. The first criterion is the level of higher education; DA is a special approach in both design practice and design education. Therefore only the

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second cycle (master level) education programs that provide specialization are included in this study. The second criterion is the focus of the programme; the programs are scanned regardless of their specific field of design. The name of a programme indicates its focus, promotes it to prospective students and distinguishes the one from others. The programs have been selected based on their names and contents. Finally, the third criterion is the geographical location of each institution. DA was born in the developed countries with the influence of design and designers on both the community and industry.

The countries are chosen based on their contribution to these two approaches. Thus the scope of the scan for programs is limited to High Income OECD Countries which are in North America and Europe (data.worldbank.org, 2014).

As the core research method, qualitative content analysis is used. During the searches associating keywords such as design, social design, SRD, DA are used. References about the overview of design education institutions are put into account as well (Ramirez Jr, 2011).

A pool of programs is filtered according to selection criteria mentioned in the previous paragraph, step by step to acquire sharpest result and gather a sample group. Admittedly, some institutions and programs that might fall into the scope of this study can be missed out. However, the programs included in this study are adequate to make inferences.

#### **4.1 SAMPLE GROUP**

To examine the influence of DA and SRD in design education specifically in master level, following institutions in the West are selected;

1. Aalto University, Finland. MA Creative Sustainability
2. Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden. MSc Design for Sustainable Development
3. Cornell University, USA. MS in Human Environment Relations
4. Design Academy Eindhoven, Netherlands. MD Social Design
5. Derby University, UK. MSc Sustainable Design and Innovation
6. Kingston University London, UK. MA Sustainable Design
7. L'école de Design Nantes Atlantique, France. MDes Responsible Innovation
8. Maryland Institute College of Art, USA. MA Social Design
9. Plymouth College of Art, UK. MA Creative Practices for Sustainability
10. School of Visual Arts NYC, USA. MFA Design for Social Innovation
11. The University of Arts Philadelphia, USA. MID Design for Social Impact
12. University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria. MA Social Design
13. University of Brighton, UK. MA Sustainable Design

## **5 THE STUDY**

The web sites of selected programs are scanned to observe; all available data including detailed information about the programs and curriculums. To attain credible and reliable inferences, six parameters for the study of a programme are designated including aim, program statements, student profile, stakeholders, course structure and outcome.

Correlations between parameters are to indicate the relationship between the programs and mentioned approaches. Results of the comparison can be seen on table 2 and table 3.

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INSTITUTION	PROGRAM	AIM	STATEMENTS						
			DESIGN ACTIVISM			COMMON	SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE DESIGN		
			SOCIAL	ECON.	POLITICAL	ENVIRONMENT	ETHICS	HUMAN.	LESS-FAVoured
Aalto University, Finland	MA Creative Sustainability	Designer's Role, Transformation	★	★★		★		★	★★
Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden	MSc Design for Sustainable Development	Sustainable Future	★	★	★	★		★	
Cornell University, USA	MS in Human Environment Relations	Healing by Design	★★			★★			
Design Academy Eindhoven, Netherlands	MD Social Design	Transformation	★★★	★	★				
Derby University, UK	MSc Sustainable Design and Innovation	Sustainable Future	★	★		★★			
Kingston University London, UK	MA Sustainable Design	Sustainable Future, Challenge status quo	★★			★		★	★
L'ecole de Design Nantes Atlantique, France	MDes Responsible Innovation	Designer's Role, Social challenges	★			★		★★	★★
Maryland Institute Collage of Art, USA	MA Social Design	Designer's Role, Transformation	★★						
Plymouth Collage of Art, UK	MA Creative Practices for Sustainability	Social challenges, Ethics	★★	★★	★	★★★★	★	★★	
School of Visual Arts NYC, USA	MFA Design for Social Innovation	Social impact	★★						
The University of Arts Philadelphia, USA	MID Design for Social Impact	Sustainable Future, Transformation	★★	★		★★			
University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria	MA Social Design	Social challenges	★					★★	
University of Brighton, UK	MA Sustainable Design	Transformation	★	★	★	★	★		

Table 2 – Relationships between programs and DA/SRD-I

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INSTITUTION	PROGRAM	STUDENT PROFILE		COOPERATING INSTITUTIONS			COURSE STRUCTURE			OUTCOME	
		DESIGN	OTHERS	PRIVATE	GOV.	NGOs	THEORY	PRACTICE	ELECTIVES	MASTER'S THESIS	MAJOR PROJECT
Aalto University, Finland	MA Creative Sustainability	✓	✓	✓		✓	Theoretical courses	Projects Workshops Excursions	✓	✓	
Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden	MSc Design for Sustainable Development	✓			✓	✓	Theoretical courses	Projects	✓	✓	
Cornell University, USA	MS in Human Environment Relations	✓	✓	Not Specified	Not Specified	Not Specified	Theoretical courses	Projects	✓	✓	
Design Academy Eindhoven, Netherlands	MD Social Design	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Research focused courses	Assignment based projects	✗	✓	✓
Derby University, UK	MSc Sustainable Design and Innovation	✓	✓	Not Specified	Not Specified	Not Specified	Research focused courses	Projects	✓	Indp. Scholarship	
Kingston University London, UK	MA Sustainable Design	✓		✓		✓	Theoretical courses Seminars	Projects Workshops Field Trips	Not Specified	(Optional)	✓
L'ecole de Design Nantes Atlantique, France	MDes Responsible Innovation	✓		✓		✓	Theoretical courses Seminars	Projects Workshops Field Trips	Not Specified		✓
Maryland Institute Collage of Art, USA	MA Social Design	✓	✓	Not Specified	Not Specified	Not Specified	Theoretical courses Seminars	Projects	✓	✓	
Plymouth Collage of Art, UK	MA Creative Practices for Sustainability	✓	✓	Not Specified	Not Specified	Not Specified	Theoretical courses	Projects	✓	(Optional)	✓
School of Visual Arts NYC, USA	MFA Design for Social Innovation	✓	✓	✓		✓	Theoretical courses	Projects Workshops	✗	✓	
The University of Arts Philadelphia, USA	MID Design for Social Impact	Not Specified	Not Specified	✓	✓	✓	Theoretical courses Seminars	Projects Workshops	✓	✓	
University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria	MA Social Design	Not Specified	Not Specified		✓	✓	Theoretical courses	Projects Workshops	Not Specified	✓	
University of Brighton, UK	MA Sustainable Design	✓		Not Specified	Not Specified	Not Specified	Theoretical courses Seminars	Projects Workshops	✗		✓

Table 3 – Relationships between programs and DA/SRD-II

### 5.1 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

There are also some constraints of the study. Data is limited to website sources. There is an undeniable chance of missing crucial information regarding the aforementioned programs. This study analyses the programs only from the perspectives of DA and SRD; the results of the study may not reflect the intention of the programme. Since this study is limited to a number of programs in a focused sample group, a detailed examination is available while leaving the general framework behind. Therefore establishing a general statement for design education is avoided.

## 6 FINDINGS

It is possible to make a number of statements about the studied educational systems by analysing the outcomes:

*Importance of social issues:* Social issues are the most common interest of all. Environmental and economic issues are also the other most mentioned topics. All programs highlight the contemporary social issues. Nine of the programs put environmental issues in their agenda, seven refer economic issues, six mention the humanitarian issues, four includes politics into their statements, and only two touches on ethical aspects of design in their statements. However, it must

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be noted that some programs have elective courses covering ethics in design as well.

*Change as a principle:* The programs in general accept the social, environmental, economic and political changes as a fact, or foresee these changes in social context. There are three frequently expressed terms to define the aim of each program. Most of the programs aim to explore the role of designers in addressing the social challenges and finding solutions by design and specific design practices. Proposing design-led solutions for a sustainable future is also an aim for the programs. Another main target is analysing and understanding the transformation in society and utilizing design in this transformation.

*Social sciences are not considered:* The number of programs that accept students with social sciences background is relatively low. Nine programs have multidisciplinary approach in their study and accept students from different domains. However, only four of these accept students with backgrounds in social, economic, and political sciences while their subjects are related to these domains. The remaining four programs are only limited to design students.

*External bodies:* Generally programs are linked to external institutions that can be potentially concerned with DA and SRD. Only two programs cooperate with both public and private bodies. Eight programs solely focused on NGOs, six cooperates with private companies and four are connected to governmental institutions. Five of the programs do not give any information about external bodies.

*Flexibility:* Majority of programs allow students to follow their own interest topics rather than attaching to a predefined course structure. The main components of the curriculums include theoretical lectures, practice-based courses and workshops. Seven programs include electives allowing students to study on their own fields of interest. Three programs do not indicate any electives.

*Theory and practice:* The study reveals that five of programs are practice-based and the remaining eight programs have a research-focused and project-based approach that combines research and practice with varying degrees. Seven programs which combine research and practice in their orientation require a Master's Thesis whereas the practice-based programs, five of the researched ones, require Major Project as an outcome for graduation. This shows the consistency between the orientation of a program and required outcome for graduation. Only one program requires both thesis and major project together for graduation. In addition, one of the programs mandates "Independent Scholarship Module" which is a study to considerable depth on a topic which interests a student (Derby.ac.uk, 2014)

## **7 DISCUSSION**

DA is evolved as the social, economic and political issues changed since 1970s. In the 2010s, Papanek's aggressive arguments turned into smooth, solution-oriented strategies without losing its principal purposes (Clarke, 2013). Apparently, progressive global crisis such as climate change, environmental pollution, poverty, unfair distribution of wealth, population growth, political flaws, inadequate healthcare, reveal the importance and the need of practical and creative solutions that design can bring in our daily lives on a personal or collective basis. Design is a discipline with its idiosyncratic methods that



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positions itself in a junction within science and other disciplines. It is a highly adaptable and unique tool that can be nourished with other sciences and is able to convert accumulated knowledge into consistent, applicable solutions for the purpose of enhancement of goods, services or systems.

In this Study, researched programs are composed of, or at least, substantially include the concerns of two approaches in their curriculums. Although some programs are practice-oriented and seek direct implementations like SRD, the programs by and large embrace the issues which are considered as the drivers of DA.

The study reveals that design education regards changing social, economic, political and environmental systems and the power of design to play a role in this transformation. Social aspects of design and contemporary awareness bring out a reconsideration of designers' priorities. Now, some institutions educate designers with social and humanitarian priorities instead of commercial interests. Hereby, DA and SRD approaches influence design education implicitly or explicitly.

Designers today, are responsible for understanding real needs of a society and develop viable, adequate solutions for the welfare of both the society and the humanity, if we go a step further all living creatures. Regardless to the geographic position, economic status or political system of a society there is always an opportunity for design to make a difference. Design reaches masses as a product, an urban space, an application or a service. It means that designers can affect and influence large number of people in societies directly or indirectly. Thus, DA and required skills for a designer to be able to cope with contemporary social issues should be introduced into design education in greater number of institutions. On the long run, even the basic theoretical foundation of DA and SRD approaches may lead to a change.

## **8 CONCLUSION**

This study attempts to understand the meanings of DA and SRD terms within the current dimensions of design theory, practice and education. While being similar in terms of approaches, DA and SRD have different scope and impact terms. The overview of the studied programs clearly shows the influence of DA and SRD approaches. The programs share notably similar aims and explore the role of designers' in addressing the social challenges and providing solutions by design. Moreover, the programs have social, environmental, economic, political and humanitarian components. Nevertheless, this does not indicate the sufficiency of the existing educational focus on DA and SRD. As a limitation, current data also can not reflect the resulted social impact of DA and SRD related design programs. The current status can be connected to the fact that DA movement itself is still in an emergence and development process. Despite this fact, further studies needed to be carried out to implicate DA and SRD in design education.

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