ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview and examples regarding design research/practice as embedded social activity. Dilnot has raised the issue of the absence of design activities from the social, e.g. design as either results or products, or alternatively, the definition of problems that originated the design activity. The placement of design as external or acting on—rather than being embedded within—fails to take into account a broader sense of social activities vis-a-vis design activities. Dilnot’s critique and positioning echoes Heidegger’s concept of dasein, and especially John Haugeland’s discussion of dasein as... "neither people nor their being, but rather a way of life shared by the members of some community. It is ways of life, in this sense, that have the basic structure of being-in-the-world". Likewise Donna Haraway’s original call for situated knowledges within a trans-disciplinary framework discusses the limits of "universalized” knowledge and research. In my paper, I propose to extend both Dilnot’s and Haraway’s position (design as a direct social activity, embedded in Haraway’s sense of situated knowledges) as a way to support a transdisciplinary framework where situated social contexts could help construct interpretive and critical frameworks for a different kind of design practice. This framework would be both local and cosmopolitan.

Keywords: research methods, decolonization, user experience, epistemology, systems design

1 Introduction

Design now functions in a larger realm, where discrete objects are part of the ongoing connections to an audience through a more comprehensive and long-term "user experience". The motivations for this include the need to respond to a networked culture, the pressures of becoming a legitimized field in a neo-liberal climate through transcending outmoded professional practices, and a realization of the scale, size and complexity of design contexts. Beginning to define design as experience (through time, contingent, interventionist) suggests opportunities to look at design activities connected to social activities.
Rethinking Social Experiences and Design Activities: A Framework

Scott Townsend

Following Latour (Latour 2005) if the social is increasingly embedded within human/non-human agencies of networked technology, service and interaction design (and other design activities less directly connected to network technology), must examine the complex interactions of systems through research.

Working from a systems perspective, designers and design researchers focus on solving complex problems through design interventions. This in general is a positive value. However, the focus on efficacy within these designed interventions can create ambiguous outcomes. Efficacy can either be about control of others or supporting agency within communities. The term “design research” carries with it a sense of authority and legitimacy. With an agenda of goal-oriented outcomes and shorter term deliverables working with clients there is less of an emphasis of reflection on the framing or critiquing of knowledge and method borrowed from other disciplines, which design research is dependent on at this point in its development. By borrowing from others we may exclude the historical practice of the other discipline, the contentious social role that knowledge production has on cultures and societies, and the subjective and contingent quality of knowledge production. We lack the historical perspective and critique embedded within that discipline.

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25: Living beings and the medium that contains them
A living being and the medium that contains it change together in a congruent manner as the spontaneous result of their recursive interactions only if these interactions trigger in both a flow of structural changes, such that the living being conserves its autopoiesis and its relation of adaptation to the medium that is its ecological niche. If this fails to happen the living being dies. Whatever the circumstances that an organism encounters in the flow of its living, its natural drift follows a path defined moment by moment by its sensory-effector correlations in the tangent with the medium in its ecological niche in which its molecular autopoiesis is conserved. This appears to the observer as if the organism were in a continuous search for the conservation of it relational well-being in its ecological niche.

26: We always do what we want
Human beings always do what we want to do, even when we say that we do not want to do what we do. When we do what we say we do not want to do, we do it because when we do it we hope to conserve something that belongs to a domain different from the one in which we do what we say we do not want to do.

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Figure 1 - Excerpt from Hugh Dubberly, Humberto Maturana Romesín, Ximena Dávila Yáñez Systemic and Metasystemic Laws in Dubberly Design Office/Articles.
Rethinking Social Experiences and Design Activities: A Framework

Scott Townsend

2 Two examples

In a recent article by Hugh Dubberly and co-written with two other authors, a series of “laws” for systems thinking are developed. (Dubberly, Romesín, Dávila Yánez, 2013) Dubberly’s continuing column, which published the article, also states that, “Models help bridge the gap between observing and making—especially when systems are involved (as in designing for interaction, service, and evolution)”. The problem here is that 1) systems thinking and it’s transference to design activities are developed in the article as “laws” (much as the law of thermodynamics) with a strong connotation of empiricism and 2) the models of interaction and service design are conflated with the kind of verification within biological and evolutionary science. Finally, one of the authors is a well-known biologist, which lends authority to the article in the minds of a lay public.

In contrast, IDEO researchers developed a series of design concepts for tong in consultation with Midea, an appliance manufacturer in China. (IDEO, 2013) Tong is a specific cultural reference regarding the understandings of health and wellbeing. Three products were speculated on that would contribute to a users “health maintenance” (in Western terms), through culturally specific Chinese
practices. These two examples of design “knowledge” are very different— one is totalizing while the other is admittedly contingent, yet appear to many designers and business clients as equivalent to each other as contemporary “design thinking”, etc.

3 Instrumental research/practice

Design practice and research is predicated on how design outcomes “act upon” subjects. On a macro-level this may lead to instrumentalist design practices, especially when neo-liberal capital and design are working in concert, and where new economic opportunities are being exploited (the development of new markets, industries, resource exploitation, etc.). Instrumentalism is a term that has various meanings, but here I am concerned with the idea of instrumentalism as a process of design research, combined with practice, creating certain outcomes based on functions and efficiency. In this way, the method applied is validated.

On a smaller scale, design researchers can be more concerned with developing a discourse on methods and knowledge. For example, in a recent design case study, participatory design methods partially failed due to a number of factors, allowing the authors to reconsider the factor of “empowerment” in their methodology when “applied to” marginalized people. (Sanders, et all 2012) In my own recent work, I have noted the limits of a particular interpretive method (the use of boundary objects via Star and Greisemer, which continues to be applied in design thinking), where social systems are undergoing stress based on long-term civil strife (Serbia). My work raised issues in general about the social contract implicit in the assumptions about boundary objects as an interpretive framework, while (for me at least) also raising questions about the research, data collection and interpretation by others working in the region. (Townsend, 2014)

In both large and small contexts, the issue of design “acting on” a culture is part of a framing of research that needs to be examined. In the above examples Western knowledge is instrumentalist (including my own example), either strongly (dictating outcomes and remaking a culture), or weakly (subject to amendment, positivist). In both cases, it may be that critical interrogation of how the “knowledge” is created needs particular reexamination.

The emphasis on useable outcomes from design research may dispense with how very contested Western knowledge actually is. There is a long history of critique both from within and from without— or example Feyerabend’s classic
Rethinking Social Experiences and Design Activities: A Framework

Scott Townsend

work criticizes the subjective and relativistic construction of knowledge in the sciences:

Methodological rules speak of “theories,” “observations,” and “experimental results” as if these were well-defined objects whose properties are easy to evaluate and which are understood in the same way by all scientists... the material which a scientist actually has at his disposal, his laws, his experimental results, his mathematical techniques, his epistemological prejudices is indeterminate in many ways, ambiguous and never fully separated from the historical background. (Feyerabend, 1975)

As design moves towards embracing a research perspective, it borrows from various fields based on their apparent effectiveness in generating new knowledge relying on method, especially from the social sciences. As design research embraces method, Sandra Harding once described method and its constraining aspect within science-(in discussing her concept of “weak objectivity”):

...the truly scientific part of knowledge seeking— the part controlled by methods of research—occurs only in the context of justification. The context of discovery, in which problems are identified as appropriate for scientific investigation, hypotheses are formulated, key concepts are defined— this part of the scientific process is thought to be unexaminable within science by rational methods. Thus "real science" is restricted to those processes controllable by methodological rules. (Harding, 1993)

For the brevity of this paper, the above critiques reside in hidden epistemological framings and justification, while at least for Harding the definition of what is considered appropriate problems, concepts, discovery et all is un-examinable within science through rational methods.

Critiques of Western knowledge and science are extended by those traditionally excluded from it, or those that have been compromised by its ideologies and practices. Donna Haraway’s discussion of “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 1988) is a position that negotiates and upholds contingent knowledge generation, arbitrating constructivist and empirical positions. Walter Mignolo extends this dialogue to the neo-colonial effects of European epistemologies and the need to engage other non-Western or hybrid knowledge production in situ as...
Within the discourse of design, Clive Dilnot raises the issue of the absence of design activities from the social, e.g. design as either results or products, (acting upon) or alternatively, the definition of problems that originated the design activity. (Dilnot, 1982) The placement of design as external or acting on—rather than being embedded within fails to take into account a broader sense of social activities vis-a-vis design activities. Dilnot’s critique and positioning echoes Heidegger’s concept of dasein, and especially John Haugeland’s discussion of dasein as... "neither people nor their being, but rather a way of life shared by the members of some community. It is ways of life, in this sense, that have the basic structure of being-in-the-world". (Haugeland, 2005)

This last reference suggests a critique of design “acting upon” versus “embedded within”. It implies that the Western notion of a professional and individualized designer-actor, applying design solutions, may have limitations and not be the only way to define design. “Design” or what we consider as design in a western context, can be embedded agency among many—design as dispersed within the community. How do we define design outside of an “acting upon” framework?

4 Examples

Foucault invented the neologism of “heterotopia” as a way to describe what may be socially constructed outside of the sanctioned spaces of a particular culture. (Foucault, 1977) This idea has been further developed in how urban spaces are used and appropriated in ways that inevitably resist the consignment of those spaces to official managed use. There are historical patterns that can be discerned from particular “design interventions” where design and social activity are oddly aligned together, without any intention, rather than being placed within problem/solution models.

In “Heterotopias and the Experience of Porous Urban Space” Stavrides details the emergence of a heterotopic space in Athens after the confrontation between Greece and Turkey after World War I. As a result of the conflict, refugees arrived from Turkey, with little in the way of resources, and were relocated by the Greek government to primarily urban areas. One of the later sanctioned design interventions was the Alexandras Avenue Refugee Building Complex, ostensibly
built in part to insulate the immigrant groups from the existing urban community, through the creation of a buffer or border:

...separation was not based on a layout that tried to impose physical segregation. Formless outdoor space was left to surround and contain the blocks...Residents who had to face a hostile and unfriendly environment...appropriated the loose space through private and common activities that could not be contained in the buildings. (Stavrides, 2007)

As Stavrides shows, attempts to impose social control unintentionally aided in the creation of a thriving social space that created porous connections to the surrounding urban spaces through an intentionally designed “non-space”. In my own work with students in upper level design courses, we have uncovered similar urban space usages in our local environment, most notably the use of undeveloped beltline tracts of land used to create social spaces by immigrant groups. (Townsend 2011) This positioning goes a step further from ideas of positivist co-creation, to one in which the subjects are aware and quite capable of redefining the system where they were made invisible, or objectified as quantitative census data. I would like to suggest that the concept of heterotopia (which has been primarily thought of as discrete public spaces) can be rethought as a series of social/physical spaces and more importantly here as networks in transnational space, that then becomes another alternative way of looking at designing in distinction to complex technological and information-based systems of control. This framework would be both local and cosmopolitan.

5 Memefest and work with local indigenous activists

Memefest is an open collective that brings together designers, artists, theorists focused on issues of design activism. The recent event held at Swinburne University in Melbourne Australia brought together designers, researchers and strategists to begin collaboration with members of the Gunnadah and Queensland communities.

In Brisbane and Melbourne Australia, indigenous communities are coming together to find ways to change their continued subordinate status with government and industrial concerns. This initiative appears to have a public facing side, which includes ways to tell the stories of the continuing issue of “the stolen generation” to others in Australia, to challenging the continuing colonial mentality in spaces and events (such as the recent G20 meeting in Melbourne). Possible public-facing strategies in play now in Australia may soon be modeled on social media strategies used by “First Nation” groups in Canada (used in Canada to put pressure on industry and government to abandon the Keystone
pipeline project). This external aspect of identity and communication is cosmopolitan in a sense, acknowledging the need to find effective strategies to increase the political cache of marginalized communities, and observing/sharing strategies based on creating interventions through designed systems (social media and the Internet and using technologies such as mobile devices, video) plus staging various actions, etc. as interventions.

On the other hand the local issues of helping “the stolen generation” return to family and community is an ongoing kind of social intervention within the community. This includes assisting directly those that find out their fostered status and their original removal from a community. Potential projects also may soon take the form of an online site that would allow for people to not only tell their particular stories of removal, but provide various ways to group and visualize the information so that maps are created to show the process of returning to the community, while creating a way to show the interconnection of the individual storyline to community members and shared memory. The maps can potentially emphasize the way that values are created and the way information is organized and made meaningful relative to indigenous culture. This includes the epistemological issues of space, community, the ordering of members of the group, paths between communities, elements of geographic space and place, etc. In contrast the accepted Western models of information design and systems become clearly biased as cultural products: from the isolation of subjects in modernist typographic grids, to the way that geographic spaces in Western cultures are based on containing things within discrete property lines and borders. The process of working with these groups is long term and complicated, however the above example suggests a kind of embedded and recursive “ethnography”. This sharing of practices discloses as much to the so-called subjects as it does to the researcher. By finding and acknowledging a set of practices and agency already existing within the community, the group can negotiate Westernized design methods with the “design methods” of the community that already exist. This particular example is still very much an evolving series of projects and ideas based on Dilnot’s observations on the issue of the absence of design activities from the social, and the larger sense of dasein. Clearly, the externalized “cosmopolitan” side of creating a larger public persona is goal oriented by necessity, while the issues of designing from within become hybridized social activities, used, rejected, ignored or used contingently for a time.

6 In conclusion
Rethinking Social Experiences and Design Activities: A Framework

Scott Townsend

A beginning framework for design at this point combines Dilnot’s original observations of design activity/social activity with Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge within a trans-disciplinary framework. Such a framework would attempt a synthesis, or at least a critical suspension and interrogation between knowledges rather than use them non-critically to provide efficacy and for particular ends or products. Trans-disciplinary knowledges in contingent and limited contexts could help construct interpretive and critical frameworks for emerging issues— the basis of a trans-disciplinary construction of knowledge is to expose the structure and meaning of how the discipline/knowledge is constructed and then to negotiate between other disciplinary bases. By siting this within Dilnot’s broader ideas of the confluence between design activity/social activities, critical interrogation of knowledges becomes situated contingently.

Donna Haraway’s original call for “situated knowledges” (rather than adumbrated and simplified contexts) is a potential feature of this framework, where social activities coincide with the synthesis capable in design activities and knowledge production. Situated knowledge is dependent on positioning (literally point of view). Much of design research focuses on the concept of “user”. Haraway’s idea of situatedness stresses the subject as a body: “even biological bodies are not natural or given entities, merely there to be discovered and unveiled. As objects of knowledge, they are brought into being by knowing and partial subjects, who have stakes in constructing them as such”. (Prins, 1995)

This position acknowledges the constructed aspects of knowing while reconciling to a degree the material world through a highly contingent and interrogated form of empiricism. Knowledge is understood in context rather than as "unlocatable, and so irresponsible knowledge claims".

Such preferred positioning is as hostile to various forms of relativism as the most explicitly totalizing versions of claims to scientific authority...The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology. (Haraway 1988)

By beginning a contestation from the subjects and their embodied viewpoints, reductionist arguments of efficacy are mitigated. An embodied subject turns and gazes back at the researcher.
Rethinking Social Experiences and Design Activities: A Framework

Scott Townsend

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Rethinking Social Experiences and Design Activities: A Framework

Scott Townsend

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