Democratic Design Experiments: From Open Design to Open Society

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2. Open Society and design

"I think an open society has the capacity to accommodate and experiment. With a plethora of public things that intertwine and expand participation and representation beyond the practices of both formal parliaments and concealed laboratories." Pelle Ehn, 2014

In Europe, designers and design researchers are increasingly exploring societal challenges through engagements with issues that call forward new publics and new modes of democratic citizenship. Whatever this is called - design activism, social design, adversarial design, participatory design, or something else - we here see design engagements which are both controversial in their commitment to agendas of social change and experimental in the sense that they openly probe for what can possibly be enacted. Framing such engagements as democratic design experiments of re-presentation and emergent civic action (Binder et al, 2015), we are proposing a conversation to explore how cultural similarities and differences influence such experiments of design in transformations towards an open society.
3. Democracy and citizenship in different cultures

While the debate on the role of design and participation in democratic development has a long history (Cross, 1972) this debate has traditionally been more concerned with what stakeholders have been invited to set priorities for the designer than with how design practices and design objects constitute democratic citizenship. But it is precisely practices and objects, which are at stake when design researchers become participants in community development. However, the concept of democracy and citizenship is different between societies. This has led to different participation tactics for design researchers working with stakeholders in their own regional contexts. After the 1st DRS conversation at Umea, where we presented examples of democratic design experiments from different European cities, we would like to kick-start our 2nd DRS conversation, with Open Design projects from Hong Kong, an Asian city between the east and west and compare them with European cases.

3.1 Open Minds

Lee and Tsang (2013) started their ‘disruptive innovation’ by curating a pop up exhibition on funeral practices and ‘fine dying’ was collaboration between 300 design students and 100 senior citizens in Hong Kong, they invoked in a very concrete sense matters of concern in the public realm. Similarly, in a Neighborhood living lab in Malmö or in a local farmers market in Milan the designers are no longer professional planners or facilitators but makers that produce new things through collaborative practices. These things may as argued by Hillgren et al. (2011) be infrastructures that tentatively gather immigrant women around such matters of concern as the caring for orphan refugees or it may as suggested by Manzini and Rizzo (2011) be the particular instantiation of novel service models bringing together producers and consumers in new configurations that may potentially travel to other communities. And Light (2015) points to the power of participatory design methods to invoke new ways of understanding our societal potential as well as investigate them.

3.2 Open Language

What makes such efforts design experiments is both the designers’ emphasis on a design object and their dual commitment to the particularity of the engagement in which they are part and to the scalability of the regime of knowledge and agency that emerges in this engagement. Following Latour when he suggests to see the contemporary designer as the cautious prometheus (Latour, 2008). Lee and Tsang use their city as their laboratory to challenge citizens’ perspective on taboo subjects. Their ‘Open Dementia City’ mapped out the possible scenarios what if all citizens became patients with dementia for awareness building. In Helsinki, Mattelmäki et al (2007) demonstrate that as they take part in rethinking work practices and interactions around local schools what they design is not only a reflection of the values of the participants but an evocative yet humble articulation of design things (A.telier, 2012) around which everyday life evolves. We want to explore the role of design if design has agency besides and beyond semiotic signification and in democratic design experiments it is precisely this agency.
3.3 Open Hearts

But what are the confines of the design practices that perform these democratic design experiments and how do they practically constitute democratic citizenship for an open society? Binder et al. (2011) have suggested that experimental design practices may be conceived of as design laboratories where a multitude of agency is collaboratively invoked through designely manifestations of the possible, emerging though movements of estrangement and familiarization of the everyday. Messeter (2012) has in a study of RLabs a self-organized network of living labs originating in the townships of Cape Town, South Africa shown that similar ‘laboratory settings’ accommodating identity work through the appropriation of social media may become platforms for provisional community action also without the involvement of design researchers. Light (2011) pushes further the transformative potential of collaborative design, recognising that education about the potential for change is part of codesigning with the whole of society. Similarly, Lee and Tsang saw that in Hong Kong society it is necessary to explore creativity as tool of empowerment for an open society. This is why they set up the DesignAge Hong Kong Club to reframe citizens’ ingenuity and training them to be creative citizens to reimagine their city together.

4. Organizing research questions

1) How can designerly engagements with taboo subject constitute creative citizenship for open society through an embrace of both controversy and collaboration?
2) What does a notion of democratic design experiments as an exploration of the possible entail in terms of openness and creativity?
3) What is performed and enacted in design laboratories of democratic design experiments and how does the notion of rehearsals connect to issues of replicability, scalability and representation?

5. Set-up of the session

In this conversation, we invite participants to continue the exploration of the notion of democratic design experiments between laboratory and parliament. The organisers will act as moderators in an open forum discussion in which the first two catalysts will offer brief examples from their own work in Hong Kong and cross reference to the works by their European collaborators to stimulate the conversation.

6. References


HKDI DESIS Lab for Social Design Research (2015) Open Design Forum 2014: Co-creating our open societies through design

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