Digital commons, urban struggles and the role of Design

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Abstract: In this paper, we reflect on design as a field that is currently in the process of re-evaluating its political agency. Generally, the political dimensions of design are reflected upon thoroughly and are under continual development, however, this paper describes a break in today’s discourse about design as a political actor: While historically designers have attempted to induce social change by designing objects, today (social) design understands itself as a change agent in a much more direct relation to the social. Reflecting on possible implications, we identify the need to re-evaluate and differentiate our understanding of design’s roles to productively deal with the contradictions that arise from the traditional framings of our field in the context of this paper. We also describe our approach for exploring this problem space both theoretically and practically. For this, we reflect on our contributions to MAZI, an interdisciplinary and EU-funded research project at the interface of DIY networking technology, participatory design and civic political initiatives, which allows for practical exploration of this query on various levels. After describing the structure and setup of the project as interpreted through the lens of the problem space laid out in the paper, we discuss preliminary insights that emerge from the project work vis-à-vis the issues presented and provide an outlook on future work.

Keywords: social design, political design, infrastructuring, DIY networking

1. Introduction

Design has never existed in a political vacuum. It is deeply embedded and intertwined in the construction, stabilization and deconstruction of societal realities. Designers act out of ethical, economic or political positions, consciously or unconsciously. The artefacts they design act as new
structures predetermining action, whether it is furniture, service concepts, cars or machine guns (Hörning, 2012). Even the design process itself is defined by power structures, by decisions about who gets to take part or about who designs for whom – out of which dispositive and ideological predetermination. Non-political design is an impossibility, regardless of whether its protagonists understand their own positions as political or not:

»No plan has ever been beneficial to everybody. [...] plans are usually compromises resulting from negotiation and the application of power. The designer is party in these processes; he takes sides. Designing entails political commitment – although many designers would rather see themselves as neutral, impartial, benevolent experts who serve the abstraction of ‚the common good‘« (Rittel, 1987, p. 7)

Consequently, design has been discussed about, reflected upon and interpreted as a political actor in many ways, from various perspectives and with different nuances for more than a century. Throughout the past decades, different schools, collectives and individuals have addressed the entanglement of design and social change. Historical examples include the Werkbund, the Bauhaus\(^1\) or the Ulm School in Germany, all of which were decisively aiming at inducing change at the societal level. In many of these cases, the political agency of design was presumed to lie in the normative powers of the built environment – be it to instil order into the chaos of World War I (Schneider, 2012), to promote rationalism and standardization (Hörning, 2012, p. 29) or to nudge a war-battered nation to adopt values of reason, sobriety and functionality that have been inscribed into its artefacts, ranging from tableware to urban planning, in order to guide it away from anything that was connoted with the folkloristic and ornamental aesthetics of the Nazi years (see Spitz, 2013).

Design history is saturated with positions that exemplify an on-going process of reflection and discussion of design as a field for shaping societal realities. Many of these processes have co-shaped the world we are living in today. The rise of Participatory Design in the 1970s (Mareis, 2013), for example, gave way to the involvement of non-designers for making processes more inclusive and sustainable, evoking changes that still affect the way we look at design today.

Nevertheless, in the last couple of years it seems as though we are witnessing a renewed and strong interest in a political reading of design, a transformation in focus that shifts from the how we design to the what, to the very object of design (Willis, 2013). We are increasingly discussing terms and theories such as Design Activism,\(^2\) Design for Social Innovation,\(^3\) Social Design,\(^4\) Adversarial Design,\(^5\) Transformation Design\(^6\) and Transition Design\(^7\) that hint at novel readings of the relationships between design and the social, while at the same time political institutions develop a rapidly growing interest in the methods and narratives of design-led innovation, as the vast growth of governmental-related design units such as NESTA, Mindlab, the U.S. Presidential Innovation Fellows or the Bloomberg iTeams suggest: It appears we are asking ourselves again, maybe in a different form, how

\(^{1}\) The history of the Bauhaus also opens perspectives into the interconnections between design and totalitarianism, because the Bauhaus was deeply contradictory, indeed dialectically opposed to its utopian social programmatic, – ranging from its often-criticized functionalist determinism to the direct entanglement of some of its key figures in Nazi Germany (Erlhoff, 2015).

\(^{2}\) Fuad-Luke, 2013

\(^{3}\) Manzini, 2014

\(^{4}\) Armstrong, Bailey, Julier, & Kimbell, 2014

\(^{5}\) DiSalvo, 2012

\(^{6}\) Jonas, Zerwas, & von Anshelm, 2015

\(^{7}\) Irwin, Kossoff, & Tonkinwise, 2015
we as designers can contribute – or are in fact, willingly or unwillingly, contributing – to societal processes of transformation.

1.1. A new immediacy
Observing, reflecting on and enacting the diverse range of political qualities of design is not new – what does seem new though is the immediacy with which designers attempt to evoke societal change. Here, we observe a turning point in today’s discourse about design as a political actor, in which (social) design increasingly understands itself as a change agent in a much more direct relation to the social.

While protagonists of the Bauhaus or the Ulm School aimed at inducing change into social dimensions via the design of objects (as a proxy) and at evoking change in societies by radically redesigning their built environment, today’s understanding of design involves unmediated interventions in the structures of the social: Instead of building modern homes for modern people, we aim to improve and re-shape neighbourhoods with participatory design processes; instead of collaborating with users in the design of new products, we develop socio-material assemblages in order to create spaces and structures for novel ways of living and producing; and we proclaim the relevance of design for the creation, sustainment and diversification of publics (DiSalvo, 2010).

The novelty today is the framing of the social as the immediate object of design, which, instead of being altered via the design of products, services or signs, thereby becomes the transformational subject in and of itself.

1.2. The problem with problem-solving
Against this background, we argue that traditional framings and understandings of design seem inadequate for grasping, evaluating and further developing the political agency of design today. This is particularly apparent if we entrain our modernist perspective on design-as-problem-solving from design’s traditional contexts with relatively low complexity (e.g. the design of a chair, a car or even an airport) to the idea of design as increasingly intervening with social complexity. None of the above-mentioned projects tackle issues that can be conceived of as solvable, as they are symptoms, fractions or expressions of overarching, political complexes – of societal realities – that, as Bazon Brock (2007) stated, have allegedly been under discussion within respective publics since 500 A.D – with no final answer, solution or consensus in sight. Social complexity is composed of diverse backgrounds, worldviews, interests, ideologies, wishes and needs in culmination. This implies dealing with unknowns, ambivalence and contradiction, dealing with a reality that appears to be the antitheses to absolute certainties or answers. The social is friction, tension and complexity – which we can either choose to negotiate in political processes or indulge in the illusion of simple answers, of post-political ideas about »the establishment of a consensus around one single model« (Mouffe, 2013, p. 20), a phenomenon that seems again to be both popular and unsettling in our time of Trump, Orban, Le Pen, Wilders and Petry.

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8 A prominent example of how design narratives are being employed in this way are the Innovation Team of Bloomberg Philanthropies: https://www.bloomberg.org/program/government-innovation/innovation-teams/

9 An early example for this would be the Malmö Living Lab (since 2007): http://medea.mah.se/malmo-living-labs/

A contemporary example is the Berlin-based initiative OpenState.cc, which is prototyping experimental environments for »more resilient« future societies: http://www.openstate.cc
Against this backdrop, we base our work on the necessity for design to re-evaluate and to differentiate its own framings, as we continuously strive towards becoming more involved in the bigger, socio-political picture: In working on problems that are the very subject of the societal process of negotiation, of the political, we must emancipate ourselves from the problem-solving paradigm and shift from wanting to solve to treating, discussing, changing and negotiating societal issues. In this perpetual beta, the processes of pulling and pushing within ever-changing structures of power are the subject of publics, of the on-going negotiations that manifest the political:

»They [Designers] mix what should be carefully separated – namely, the process competence to conceive and organise change processes and the competence to decide what is preferable or good. The former is design and research competence, the latter a negotiation and decision process among stakeholders, including design.« (Jonas, 2015, p. 115)

The question of how we as designers understand our own role is thus elemental: The more elements of the social that we identify as changeable by design, as variables to be included in the problem space (Rittel, 1987), the more precise we must be in re-contextualizing the reflections on the very modern definition of our own roles (e.g. designer-as-problem-solver), to avoid tapping into traps of colonialism, paternalism, simple irrelevance or performing the role of the useful idiot.

Rethinking our roles as designers is a timely endeavour: In times when even the most blatantly neoliberal enterprises come across in a philanthropic rhetoric, the vast economic and political success of narratives like Design Thinking opens many possibilities for designers to become involved in complex processes. At the same time, we must be cautious to not fall back into the elusive linearity, which Rittel & Webber (1973) characterized as illusory and dangerous in their writings on wicked problems: The self-understanding of merely needing the right mind-set or methodological approach in order to overcome the most complex of issues masks this very complexity and disguises the overarching problems, which in turn become solidified. These phantasies idealize the role of design that projects itself towards resolution instead of acknowledging its operative limits, comprehending the complexity of the social context and working towards dynamic, transient goals.

1.3. Designing structures instead of solutions

Nevertheless, even if we are permanently at risk of becoming subsumed, co-opted and instrumentized by ourselves and others, there are grounds to assume that design can offer significant contributions to large scale problems, be it through its inherent logic of impeaching the status quo, its pragmatic means for analysis, its practical strategies of prototyping and perpetual beta or its relative freedom from disciplinary boundaries. Between and beyond superficial solutions to ready-made problems and over-ambitious attempts to solve complexity, we need to practically explore novel possible roles (e.g. as mediators, catalysts or curators) for operating within the social, for recognizing and dealing with its ever-changing states. A promising way for us to negotiate the issues at stake is to query and develop perspectives on design as the creation of possibilities, choices, alternatives and openness, and hence to reflect on a notion of design that turns itself away from the creation of solutions towards the creation of means (Joost & Untheidig, 2015).
The following is a description of the project MAZI, in which we are currently focusing on the question of whether and how we as designers and technologists could construct structures, framings and resources that would in turn enable others to work on their own unsolvable problems and to have useful things for this at hand. One important design approach applied in this project is derived from a concept that emerged of the Scandinavian branch of Participatory Design and has been described as «Design as Infrastructuring» (Binder et al., 2011; Ehn, 2008). This approach prescribes experimentation through living labs and public interventions to understand and shape the opportunities for designers and technologists as well as for the results of their processes to partake in the shaping of our societies in a socially, economically and culturally sustainable way. As opposed to framing design as the problem-solving discipline, the »infrastructure« metaphor designates the creation of possibilities, of structures, in and through which stakeholders can create their own solutions (Björgvinsson, Ehn, & Hillgren, 2010).

2. The MAZI project

Our contributions to the three-year, cross-European and interdisciplinary project MAZI provides us with a rich infrastructure to complement theoretical considerations within the nexus described above. Our experiences have allowed us to initiate explorations into this perspective practically, along with its potentials, contradictions and implications.

The MAZI consortium consists of a network of universities and civic initiatives across five European countries. MAZI poses the question of how we can enable people who are new to or unfamiliar with wireless DIY network technology to think in its terms and apply it to their needs. The major novelty of MAZI is to offer people technologically mediated interactions that lie beyond the global and proprietary internet paradigm, and the basic idea is to design a structure that allows anybody to quickly and easily build his or her own network with off-the-shelf hardware and open source modules (these networks could range from a single household to a building, a neighbourhood or a whole city).

MAZI seeks to foster the re-appropriation of network technology outside the dominant corporate offers and beyond the marginal tech-savvy domain by developing and providing a toolkit that allows for easy setup of one’s own »internet«. With this, the project aims at both providing environments for individuals and groups to setup, develop and maintain their own networks, as well as initiating, bridging and enriching conversations about the nexus of technology, accessibility and authorship.

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10 MAZI is funded by the Horizon2020/CAPSSI-framework of the European Commission and is a collaboration between researchers, artists and activists of different disciplines and cross five European countries around the topic of DIY networking: www.mazizone.eu

11 Being a large-scale, interdisciplinary project, different project partners have different framings and understandings of how to interpret their respective contributions, in consideration of their various disciplines and fields. The analysis and discussion of these framings (Apostol & al, 2017) is a prominent part of the project, as we aim to consciously facilitate disciplinary diversity to maximize the opportunity to learn from each other.

12 DIY networking refers to alternatives to market-driven narratives about our urban-technological futures. These systems unfold their agency outside the commercial internet paradigm and are owned by their potential users. They often consist of affordable hardware (such as a Raspberry Pi). They can be set up in a DIY manner and are often constrained in their reach to a local space, connecting only those in physical proximity, and thus unfold novel possibilities to think and to perform hybrid public spaces (Antoniadis, Ott, & Passarella, 2014).
With this, the project responds to the insufficient availability and lack of diverse alternatives to market-driven network technology. Non-tech-savvy individuals and groups have few options that go beyond the use of commercially developed applications, which are becoming increasingly naturalized and centralized by market dominators like Google, Facebook or Microsoft. These applications in turn shape the way we think about technologically mediated communications, technologies as such and our technological futures in general. Despite the long and rich history of alternative narratives and DIY ways to apply network technology for community- and value-driven purposes, these narratives are by and large inaccessible to most. They remain the domain of the tech-savvy, of hackers and geeks. With the financial and structural help of the EU’s CAPSSI\textsuperscript{13} framework, this project setup provides the chance to make DIY networking a discussion for a larger public and to provide the means for a wide range of citizens to appropriate and make use of this technology in ways that extend past the narratives told by a few.

2.1 The project consortium and the approach

Consequently, the technology in development for the project is framed as the creation of possibilities that go further than the purposes for which technology usually aims. To do so, the project has coalesced around a group of specific contexts and communities that provide both the partnerships and the environments within which the technology is being designed. The consortium is conceived as a network of diverse partners, representing different instantiations of both established institutions and civic society initiatives\textsuperscript{14} and building four partnerships, each formed through the close collaboration of a university or research institution and a local community.

Specifically, this process is undertaken simultaneously in four different cities, each hosting a close collaboration between a research institution and local civic society organizations: 1) In Berlin, the Design Research Lab (University of the Arts) partners with the Neighborhood Academy\textsuperscript{15}, 2) the Napier University Edinburgh collaborates with the nomadic group UnMonastery\textsuperscript{16}, 3) In Zurich, the non-profit organization NetHood works together with the INURA common office and the cooperative housing network Kraftwerk\textsuperscript{17} and 4) in London, SPC\textsuperscript{18}, an initiative supporting local grassroots organizations with vast experience in social and community-driven network technology, collaborates with the Open University. Each of these civic society groups embody and represent different dimensions of community-driven, social innovation, not only providing alternatives to investor-driven development to the ways we live, work and produce, but also prototyping sustainable approaches to the local in times of ever-expanding logics of the global.

While each of the four pilots is in the process of conducting their very own, inherently individual, site- and context-specific processes of designing DIY networking infrastructure over the course of three years, they are nevertheless closely interconnected with one another. The goal is to generate a rich body of knowledge about the creation, appropriation and use of DIY networking technology, as well as about the discourses around it – to learn from the processes in four specific, local contexts in

\textsuperscript{13}https://capssi.eu
\textsuperscript{14}The consortium decidedly includes communities that are »traditionally« not represented in market-driven tech development. This is corresponding with the regulations of the project’s funding scheme, which demands the active inclusion of non-ICT partners into the development of ICT, a regulation most interesting and welcome considering our critique of linear processes of problem solving paradigms.
\textsuperscript{15}www.nachbarschaftsakademie.org
\textsuperscript{16}www.unmonastery.org
\textsuperscript{17}www.kraftwerk1.ch
\textsuperscript{18}www.spcl.ch
order to scale, synthesize and transfer the learnings gained towards informing and shaping the design of the toolkit, a process that runs parallel and is stewarded by the University of Thessaly in Volos, Greece.

Figure 2: The organizational structure of the project consortium

With this setup, we aim to provide social, technical, cultural and political diversity as the context in which to explore different approaches, roles and contradictions in practice. Furthermore, the project is set up as an iterative and participatory prototyping approach itself, corresponding to its goal of designing a toolkit that is concrete and defined enough to be useful while at the same time open enough to allow for appropriation and adaption by and for a wide range of possible scenarios.

2.2 The MAZI process: Iterative and participatory design of a toolkit

Referring to the problem space described in the first section of this paper, the project presents us with a rich set of unsolvable problems, as any solution on how to appropriate network technology outside the commercial determinations would in turn be determinations themselves. In its attempt to develop a toolkit based on case studies and collaborations with local initiatives, the MAZI project answers to this complexity by conceptualizing both the process and the eventual outcomes of the project as infrastructure, as generator of possibilities, as a collection of tools in different dimensions – physical, digital and social. The toolkit itself is therefore anticipated to consist of a wide range of components – affordable and off-the-shelf hardware (that is easy to get and easy to set up), modular applications (that can be combined in a way similar to WordPress), an API (that allows smooth additions by others but also physical elements), case studies and platforms (to communicate with other individuals and groups interested in the appropriation of the toolkit) as well as documentations and repositories of blueprints, protocols and processes.
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2.3 The Berlin Pilot

To give an example of these pilot studies, we will briefly describe the case of the MAZI/Berlin pilot, in which the Design Research Lab (DRLab)\textsuperscript{19} of the Berlin University of the Arts\textsuperscript{20} collaborates with Common Grounds,\textsuperscript{21} the civil society platform for Neighborhood Academy\textsuperscript{22} (NAk). NAK is actively engaged in the discussions about sustainable and just approaches to urban development in Berlin and beyond. In this, NAK promotes cooperative forms of shared use and management of resources (urban commons), moderates between different stakeholders (municipalities, civil society, universities) and acts as a platform for different initiatives to share and exchange knowledge, methods and experiences. This process is referred to as »collective learning«, a perspective that creates contextual cohesion within a multitude of processes, narratives, discourses and practices in regard to critical urban movements in Berlin and beyond.

\textsuperscript{19}http://www.design-research-lab.org
\textsuperscript{20}https://www.udk-berlin.de
\textsuperscript{21}http://common-grounds.net
\textsuperscript{22}http://www.nachbarschaftsakademie.org

Figure 1: Process design for the development of the toolkit: Different aspects or categories of it are being applied, appropriated and developed in the four different pilot studies. The processes within the pilots in turn are being reflected across the project and the respective communities. The learnings gained inform the design of the toolkit.
The collaboration between NAK and DRLab seeks to develop both a framework and a set of tools that builds upon and fosters the civic discourse about the right to the city,\(^{23}\) by developing, adopting and testing technology to activate, connect, synergize and promote the different grassroots practices present in the city. Considerable emphasis was put on the initial phase of community outreach, which dedicated months to bringing together different initiatives and actors to discuss key aspects of the social space and how it is produced, both regarding its physical and digital conditions. The initial phase also spent a great deal of time imagining how technology could be a facilitator of these processes in general, before entering more concrete discussions about the design of DIY network technology in this context. We strove to establish connections and create synergies in-between the discourses about the political aspects of DIY networking technology (e.g. community ownership of technological development, community owned data, DIY technology and self-organization) and the critical urban practice of NAK and the wider landscape of initiatives. A series of facilitated ideation sessions and co-design workshops with participants from the various civic initiatives took place. The workshops were intended to initiate conversations, clarify positions of the groups towards the identified political matter and speculate about ideas and scenarios connecting it to their practices. Through these discussions, initial scepticism and reluctance towards the potential value of technology for the relevant initiatives resolved into partnerships of mutual interest.\(^{24}\)

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\(^{23}\) To describe, understand and further develop current struggles in the context of urban development, scholars and activists alike are showing a renewed interest in the ideas of the «right to the city» (Lefebvre, 1972). Lefebvre described this right as the possibility for individuals to take part in the qualities of the urban, but also in the processes of its becoming; hence it is not surprising to look at the renaissance of this notion in times of gentrification and investment-driven developments taking the lead in many cities around the globe.

\(^{24}\) These partnerships are however not free of tensions, asynchrony and conflict. A reflection on the productive clash of worlds and disciplines as well as on the tactics and strategies used to work with them within the MAZI project can be found in MAZI deliverable D.3.11 (Apostol & al, 2017).
The workshops eventually led to a first tangible prototype applied to the case of the Neighborhood Academy. The concrete departure point of this first instantiation was the particular challenge of transferring knowledge faced by the actors of NAK: Usually, NAK’s core protagonists are the ones present at NAK’s events. They are the ones who travel in their functions as coordinators and have regular encounters with other individuals and groups they deem relevant and interesting for the body of content that is continuously being created by NAK. Hence, the problem defined to be tackled by the pilot team was the question of how to disseminate this knowledge as well as how to build and offer epistemological bridges between different initiatives and actors that work in related fields and could therefore also benefit greatly from novel ways of sharing experiences.

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25 This process, the prototype developed by the team within the first phase of the project as well as the consortium’s plan for the remaining 48 months are described in detail in the MAZI D2.1 (Unteidig & al, 2016).
As a first experiment, we conceptualized a living sound archive, a local library that was envisioned to store, display and provide access to the bespoken contents. Over the course of two months, the initiative, its partners and the design team at DRLab transformed this concept into a tool that simultaneously serves the need to document and publish knowledge as it is getting generated. It aims at the already mentioned problem of transforming the contents created into a common good, owned and accessible by and to the community it intends to serve.

FIGURES 7,8 & 9: Screenshots of the broadcasting feature of the »NAk \archive«, the user interface as seen after logging on to the open WIFI SSID on the user's own device.

FIGURE 10: The hardware-setup of the first prototype: A battery pack, a Raspberry Pi and a Wi-Fi router. All data relevant for the prototype was exclusively stored and hosted locally. The compact setup was helpful in demonstrating the versatility of this technological approach to setting up DIY networks.
Currently, we are testing both the prototype designed within the Berlin pilot as well as the first versions of the MAZI toolkit, with the goal of merging the two technological strands of development.

Simultaneously, we are preparing to re-open the design process for the wider community of urban initiatives in Berlin by starting new partnerships. We are looking to host workshops that aim at appropriations of the toolkit’s first versions. And we are about to kick off the next iteration of co-design processes to develop technology that brings value to the work of the civil society organizations we are working with.

3. Discussion

With the contours of MAZI, we have introduced a design cases where the designer cannot and does not operate alone but instead helps create and foster alliances to reach far past the horizon design – with FLOSS movements, with technologists, lawyers, activists, philosophers, policy-makers, artists and the many civic initiatives which we aim to amplify and from which we have many lessons to learn. Through engaging in this project and by connecting it to the theoretical considerations outlined in this paper, we are establishing the basis for manifold explorations of a possible understanding of design that is evolving from a decisively modern self-understanding (ingenious problem-solving, designer-authorship, etc.) towards a field striving to experiment with itself and its interdependence with others, with other logics of collaboration, with other concepts of authorship and other possible futures within and beyond the nexus of design and democracy.

Looking at the collaboration between the Design Research Lab, the Neighborhood Academy and Berlin’s wider landscape of political-urban initiatives, it seems relevant to mention that the main concern – and thus the object of design – at this stage of the project was the construction of shared viewpoints, the migration of discourses and the negotiation of perspectives and roles. The establishment of common grounds in these regards were crucial in this stage of the pilot. We now depart from a point where the parties involved share both ownership and authorship for the processes in which we are all mutually engaged. There is also a shared understanding of the politics inherent to the development, use and distribution of technology: While the «right-to-the-city» discourse asks about individuals’ and groups’ accessibility and openness to partake in the production of the urban, the topics under discussion in the MAZI project provide perspectives on the normativity of technological developments (which actually follow a similar track) that shape countless aspects of our lives. These two seemingly different discourses culminate in critical reflections on smart city narratives (Antoniadis & Apostol, 2014) and other depictions of our urban futures. Further collaborative work on these intersections looks promising: If we wish to enrich the relevant discourses within and across the boundaries of the different communities, to raise awareness and to build capacities around the topic of DIY networks, ownership of technology/data and self-organization, we must conceptualize the very translation in-between the different domains and discourses a design challenge in and of itself.

26 http://www.mazizone.eu/toolkit
Hence, while the concrete outcome of the project is set to be the conception of a toolkit, its aim is much wider and encompasses the crystallization of constellations of networks, synergies and discourses that have come about within the process of designing it. In this process, we understand our role to be situated in-between the logics of innovation from below – from grassroots initiatives – and mediation upwards – to policy-makers and funding agencies such as the European Commission – to which the consortium brings arguments and case studies that advocate for value-based technology development and its strengthening through respective funding schemes.

As for our initial query into the roles and possible understandings of politically engaged design today, we plan on further developing our reflections of on-going role transformations. We are carefully observing the emerging tension and negotiations – both within the project’s diversity and in reflecting our own role(s) as designers. We aim to be awake and sensitive to the different challenges, conflicts and contradictions that arise from our work. Exemplary points under discussion are the different currencies and forms for disseminating the project’s outputs (e.g. this paper) and different perspectives on criteria for success. On-going construction, deconstruction and hybridization of roles and identities are special topics that arise in all mentioned scales, such as bottom up/top down, provider/client, maker/user, speaker/listener, editor/reader, teacher/learner, community/institution or organizer/technologist. These experiments in and for themselves do not necessarily solve the complexities, paradoxes and contradictions they engage with – neither regarding our query into design nor the nexus of technology, politics and ownership. Rather, they aim at what Herbert Simon described as »[...] to motivate activity which in turn will generate new goals« (Simon, 1996, p. 188) – at the creation of structures for possible futures to emerge and allow for transformation, adaptation and appropriation.

Against this backdrop, the version of a »Design for Next (Society)« which we aim to bring into this discussion does not attempt to legitimate itself by proposing solutions to the issues talked about in this paper. Instead, it is one possible way of exploring conceptual thoughts – by acting them out, by consciously contradicting ourselves in the messiness of the empirical and by walking the different routes ahead of us, both theoretically and practically.

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