Design Paradox. The next chapter in the design process

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Abstract: Design is supposed to be an engine of economic growth within the consumerist system. Often accused of being an accomplice of the market, it shares responsibilities with the dominant system. The designer is faced with a paradoxical situation: whilst living in quite a conservative society that is obsessed with growth and framed by economical rules, current and multiple crises show that we cannot grow longer, at least not as fast as we are accustomed to. Thus how can he perform in a consumption-centred society while being aware of the fragility of the system? Is design facing a dead end situation? What is next? Design can also be seen as an engine for social change. Contemporary situations must once again be questioned: social hierarchy needs to be reformed and the level of involvement of individuals needs to be rethought in a bottom up process.

Keywords: Society, Diffuse design, Participatory design, Experimental design, Social innovation

1. Design value

1.1 Design as a business strategy

In his book Design value, Pr.Dr. Peter Zec expands the idea that design and business success go hand in hand. Citing Thomas J. Watson’s mantra “Good design is good business”, he explains how the intervention of a designer can notably increase the success of a company and boost sales:

“Design is a service that, when successful, can exponentially increase the initial investment of the company. The increased income that results from design cannot be compared with any other form of a return on investment. Only design can make a company so much money.” (Zec, 2010, p.39)

Pr.Dr. Peter Zec also describes the success of such well-known companies as Apple, Braun, IBM, Lenovo and he develops a method to quantitatively measure the value of design. According to him, it is clear that design is part of the economical system:

“The economic value of design lies simply in the fact that design is neither pointless nor an end in itself, but rather an essential contribution to the sale of product, and with this, to the turnover and profit of a company.” (Zec, 2010, p.54)
Thus according to this point of view, the main goal of designers is first and foremost to ensure the economical success of companies they work for.

Peter Zec’s assumption is part of the logic of the capitalistic system most of us are living in. To be more precise, this system is based on the accumulation of concrete forms of wealth transformed into production, which are transformed into currency, which is then transformed into new investments. In this cycle the capital is constantly invested and grows by permanent circulation. The most important agents of this system are in charge of the accumulation and growth of capital and put pressure on companies to make better profits. At the same time, a huge swath of people, whose interests can be in conflict with those of capitalism, sell their time and workforce without benefiting fully from the fruit of their labour and without more possibilities to be autonomous and active (Boltanski, Chiapello, 1999).

1.2 Beyond the economic growth

However, Peter Zec’s enthusiasm is not shared by all design theorists, neither all practitioners. Some authors and experts see in this union of business and design a treason of humanistic and ethical values. Some of them incriminate designers (Foster, 2002), others demonstrate the reasons why this attitude lead to a dead ends and show other alternatives (Thackara, 2005). Gilles Lipovetsky, offers another rough critic, he admits that capitalism is capable of increasing global wealth, but only at the price of generating profound social, ecological and economical crises, of increasing inequality and of annihilating the moral and intellectual capacities of individuals (Lipovetsky, Serroy, 2013). According to his point of view, the increasing competition pushes companies to be more and more inventive, making the intervention of the designer most needed. By supporting the system obsessed with growth, the designer becomes its collusive, agrees with its values and, consequently, shares a part of responsibility in its harm. When Peter Zec says that design matters “especially in times of economic crisis” because “it becomes more and more clear that companies must ultimately sell their products in order to survive” (Zec, 2010, p.20) he eliminates the question of the impact of industrial activity. The bigger picture is that growth has reached a real material and human limit: Dennis Meadows, who has been studying the limits to growth for 40 years now (among others), explains that the idea of unlimited physical growth on a planet with limited physical resources is impossible and can only lead to disaster (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, 2004).

2. From consumer to prosumer

2.1 Historical perspective

What was the historical mechanism that brought our civilization into this situation? Historically, the alienation of the lower classes was dictated by economic interests of the emerging entrepreneurial class. If we take the example of the Enclosures in XVIIIth century Great Britain, the English peasantry, seen as available labor, was transformed with the help of the government into a capitalistic workforce. Michael Perelman explains this process in his book “The Invention of Capitalism” :

“The brutal acts associated with the process of stripping the majority of the people of the means of producing for themselves might seem far removed from the laissez-faire reputation of classical political economy [...] In reality, the dispossession of the majority of small-scale producers and the construction of laissez-faire are closely connected, so much so that Marx, or at least his translators,
labeled this expropriation of the masses as “primitive accumulation.” (Perelman, 2000, p.11)

Later on, came the idea that one could use the same « human material » to increase profit by creating a consumer class from this very workforce. During XIXth century, worker’s wage were equivalent to their biological needs, the satisfaction of which was necessary to maintain their lives. With Fordism, the increase of wages rewarded the workers efforts, allowing him access to the consumption of products and leisure activities (Assouly, 2008). Throughout this transformation the masses lost the ability to have a critical perspective on their own condition. Nowadays, some authors point the problems of the lack of connection with the reality and of the passivity of the individuals.

Art critic Jonathan Crary set up a genealogy of attention since the XIXth century and until our days. The widespread crisis of attention, addressed in his writings, has been triggered by the emergence of new technical forms of communication. The latter led to the restructuring of the society by isolating the individuals beyond the community. According to him, the attention of individuals was organized and channelled towards labor, education and consumption. The management of the attention of individuals allows control on their experience, which is subordinated to a certain logic of organisation of everyday life (Crary, 2014). We could link this statement to the concept of destruction of the experience developed by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben. He describes the inability of his contemporaries to pass on their experience and the lack of involvement into a construction of their own reality. Thus a predefined behavioural model substitutes free interaction between the individual and his environment. The experience is unfolding aside from the individual, who is observing it passively (Agamben, 1978). In addition to this argument, writer Matthew B. Crawford points out that our contact with the real world is happening through a system of representations (Crawford, 2015). Those representations, which are mainly the result of designers work, mediate the individuals experience of his environment.

2.2 The promise of the Third Wave

The problem is that the consumer is disconnected from the reality of production. Even though we are slowly gaining awareness in regards to the system we live in, consumer society is claiming the abundance of material goods. There are already some emerging, self-organized movements whose aim is to restore social balance. But for the most part the way of thinking about design seems to follow conservative pro-capitalistic values, and yet, instead of following market-driven practice, designers could become a facilitators for this transition. Pelin Tan highlights this idea in her essay “Collective Disaster”:

“Although many architects and designers still base their work around standard office practice and are dependent on neoliberal global market, some of them are forming collectives that exchange labor and create practices based on transversal methodology. The economic crises empowers many large-scale offices but also the Occupy movements. Their search for alternatives to austerity and their networks of trans-local solidarity open new paths of practice for design.” (Tan, 2016, p.103)

The creative process could bring designers and consumers together. In this scenario, the latter is physically and intellectually involved into the industrial process and thus becomes capable of shaping their own reality.

This concept of transforming a consumer into a prosumer, was described by writer and futurist Alvin Toffler, who distinguished three forms of evolution in our civilization by using the metaphor of waves (Toffler, 1980). The First Wave is linked to the agricultural revolution, The Second Wave to the
outbreak of the industrial civilisation and The Third Wave to the new technologies and new social order. The latter is unfolding in current society. According to his theory, during the First Wave civilization, the land had a central part in the economical, cultural and political perspectives. Every community was self-sufficient by producing everything it needed by itself. Then, in the Second Wave civilization, the link between the producer and the consumer was splitted by the use of new technologies, by centralized economy and by new forms of social organisation. By putting the economic growth first, the economical sphere invaded the social and cultural spheres. The human relationships were reduced to the economic exchange resulting from the system of values conveyed by capitalism built on industrialism. According to Alvin Toffler, blaming numerous crises, disasters and increasing inequality on the Second Wave civilization, it is a matter of survival to engage with the altered consciousness of the Third Wave civilization for creating “the first truly humane civilization in recorded history” (Toffler, 1990, p.11). The Third Wave has the objective of creating a new type of citizen, by drawing him into the production process – the prosumer.

2.3 Design paradox

Almost thirty years after this prophecy, we are still in transition towards the Third Wave civilization. New technology has indeed made sharing information easier, but hasn’t yet replaced growth as the only goal of our system, nor has is done much to curb increasing inequalities. Even though, we hear more and more about “prosumers”, and a resurgent Do-It-Yourself (DIY) economy. In a way, being a prosumer is to be willing to engage with reality in an active way, by making or expressing one’s subjectivity. As Hannah Arendt puts it in “The Human Condition”:

“Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical object, but qua men. This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human [...] A life without speech and without action [...] is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (Arendt, 1958, p.176)

The Third Wave seems to have a great potential for positive change. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore what a critical designer has to say regarding the prosumer society. In his essay Designing Our Own Graves for Design Observer, Dmitri Stiegel writes that he is worried about the future of design in a Do-It-Yourself economy. With the emerging form of “inverted consumerism” or “social production” there is a tendency to democratize the practice of design in the sense that anybody can be a designer. The new “information” economy changed not only the way we share information but also the consumer’s approach to products:

“As the template mentality spreads, consumers approach all products with the expectation of work. They are looking for the blanks, scanning for fields, checking for customization options, choosing their phone wallpaper, rating movies on Netflix, and uploading pictures of album art to Amazon. The template mentality emphasizes work over style or even clarity.” (Stiegel, 2006)

The conclusion of Dmitri Stiegel is that design as a profession could be marginalized in a society where prosumers have achieved autonomy from industrial production and, possibly, designers will have nothing left to do, other than designing themselves.

The argument of Dmitri Stiegel is relevant to some extent, especially when we take a closer look at some concrete cases. Let’s take the example of Ikea. This company lets its customers assemble the
Ikea designed objects by themselves, the reason is mostly economic – it saves times and cost for the company. The unexpected consequence of selling a flat-pack furniture to its customers is that the whole internet community with a great creative potential started to hack their products in order to create a new models and share the result on the web.

Indeed, Do-It-Yourself can be a strong emancipation and political tool. That was the case in the sixties with the project Proposta per un’autoprogettazione by Enzo Mari, used as a critic of consumerism and as a pedagogical tool to help people understand how things are made. The same ideal is at play in the project HARTZ IV Möbel (German welfare furniture), which encourages users to build things instead of buying them in order to face the current economic crisis.

But if we think of design as an activity made to benefit everyone in a society of prosumers, which is already the concept of today’s open source, how are designers supposed to earn a living? It could be managed with an unconditional basic income, as long as their work concerns public interest. But in our neoliberal society, where open source designers have to make commercial projects for a living, it is probably not yet possible.

Here we face a paradox. As it stands, designers can no longer work for the Second Wave industrial civilization - because it’s a dead-end model, not in favor of the prosumer society - because it would make disappear the discipline.

Whilst the transition to the Third Wave civilization could take a few more decades, some designers, willing to engage with a community into a transition process, are progressively building common knowledge and launching educational workshops.

In this context two ideas are worth being developed and illustrated: the idea of participatory creative process and the idea of the client. In other terms, hereunder will be developed the case of designer as moderator and the case of designer as expert.

### 3. Examples

#### 3.1 Designer-moderator

What is the role of designer in a co-creation process? Where does funding come from in self-initiated projects? “Collective furniture” is an experimental project curated by Vienna based Breaded Escalope design studio. Their goal was to make a community of users go through a creative and decision process. In concrete terms, Breaded Escalope design studio designed the briefing of a project which was to create a piece of furniture corresponding to emerging need - working at home. In order to do this with the community involved, they made an online platform embodying a frame allowing communicate announcement, opinion polls and interactions. In Addition to the virtual platform, they organized physical workshops with anybody interested. A broad range of participants, specialists as well as amateurs, came from different fields. This one year-long project gathered about 60 participants. The whole project had different layers of interaction and different agents: designers, experts and the community. The development of the project was supported by a group of specialists giving their expertise with a focus on home as a simultaneously social, private and professional space. Such a large scale project required a strong financial support. The experiment was funded by Departure, the Creative Unit of the Vienna Business Agency. In return, Departure asked the creative team to set up a collaborative project with a manufacturing company. The goal of Departure was to come up with an economically viable product, using new creative methods and experimenting new
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processes to develop new products with a manufacturing company. Concerned of ease of use and locality, Breaded Escalope design studio chose to use German language for the online platform as well as for the communication made about the project. It was important that the partner company was Austrian as well, using local material and human resources. The chosen company, Neue Wiener Werkstätte’s products are exclusively made in Austria, has a handcraft know-how, uses sustainable materials and only produce furniture on demand. All in all, this quite complex structure for a project included not only designers, experts and the community, but the economic background guaranteed by Departure, whose interest lies in the development of the economy with creative industries, and NWW as a manufacturing expert benefiting from the development of the project.

This type of crowdsourcing is already used by other big companies. Economists call it “externalizing labor costs” which means that a company that lets customers do part of the job (like Ikea). Marie-Anne Dujanier, labor sociologist, showed how market capitalism gained from the reduction of labour cost by transforming the consumer-purchaser into a consumer-producer (Dujanier, 2014). Unpaid consumers participate in the creation of the added value of products that they then have to pay to possess, which is quite a paradox. Alvin Toffler had a more optimistic vision of this phenomenon in the eighties, when “externalizing labor cost” was something new. He categorized ways of thinking about the economy in two sectors A and B. Sector A corresponds to “unpaid work done directly by people for themselves”, Sector B “comprises all the production of goods or services for sale or swap through the exchange network or market” (Toffler, 1980, p.266). The idea behind it was that a prosumer would spend half their work time for the Sector B – production for exchange, and half their work time for the Sector A – production for use. But he did not take into account the interpretation of this principle by hegemonic system, who found new means to create more profits by charging twice the consumer. Pelin Tan emphasizes the problem:

« How can a practice remain outside of the neoliberal creative system that can easily absorb such practices by taking advantage of exploiting further labor forces and the new general intellect of cognitive subjectivities? » (Tan, 2016, p.103)

Back to the Collective furniture project, the outcome of this experiment is the Collective Desk - the finished product concept ready to order via the NWW webpage. Even though collective intelligence was used for creating a new product for NWW, the community working behind the scenes neither benefited directly from the result, nor was it considered as a potential client of NWW, due to the high price of the manufactured project. So what is the public gain? What is difference between this and the model criticized by Marie-Anne Dujanier?

As the gain we’re talking about cannot be material, it’s more about the experience of building common knowledge. Breaded Escalope design studio launched a platform to physically and virtually bring together experts and a broad public in order to create an open discussion and include consumers into the process of making decisions and designing a product, a realm to which “normal” consumers usually have no access to. According to the designers, the most difficult task was to keep participants motivated during such a long timespan. Newsletters, small tasks, workshops and a frequently updated online platforms helped to keep the project going and make the whole process transparent. In addition, Breaded Escalope design studio intends to make this piece of furniture more accessible for the community, by making the download of the construction plan of Collective Desk free for DIY purpose.
3.2 Designer-expert

Who benefits from the work of a designer? If design is seen as a service, is it inevitably a service paid by the client in a common sense, namely as Peter Zec defined it? If the designer does not agree with a frame of commercial project, what is the space/time condition for his subjectivity? What are the conditions for self-reflective design projects?

Some researchers and practitioner of design are convinced that design can and must be socially and politically engaged through concrete actions. Those have a quite opposite opinion to Peter Zec's about the value of design:

“Design must be responsive beyond the metrics of client satisfaction, return on investment or any other narrow conception of value formulated for design as a service profession aligned with industrial interest.” (Mazé, Llorens, 2011, p.114)

The authors of the platform Design Act – created to identify, present and discuss socially and politically engaged design practices – formulated different tactics to engage with a complex reality. One of them is Relocating the Design Agency. The point is that doing projects in situ, facing the real people’s problems by using low-tech and open-source tools, can help find more efficient solutions, improve the communication with stakeholders and at some point, emancipate them. Above all, it helps the designer to free himself from the dictatorship of an established economic system. In this case, within changing working environment, the concept of a client must change consequently. It is not a matter of clients who have the financial resources to commission a designer in order to raise the sales of their products. It is more a question of social justice regarding those who don’t have these resources for that service. Thus, socially engaged designer should find an alternative economy to sow the seed of their aspirations on a real ground.

"Design is not a formal property of certain objects, it takes place as an active, practical encounter with reality" (Fezer, 2016, p.90) according to Jesko Fezer, true design happens on the ground, and not in a design office. “The practice of design begins with the design of the problem itself” (Fezer, 2016, p.90) debating the problems is one of the possible ways of practicing design. Public Design Support is a “working hypothesis for design”. Launched and leaded by the Studio Experimental Design of HFBK, a group of students supervised by Jesko Fezer, intervened in the St. Pauli district in Hamburg suffering from gentrification. They opened a design consulting office that offered free design service to those who usually cannot afford it. For this mission they worked with social agents from GWA St. Pauli, the community organization with a long experience of interaction with neighbourhood actors. Jesko Fezer’s idea of an in situ educational experiment coincided with the launch of GWA’s project “St. Pauli selber machen” (St. Pauli: Do it yourself) investigating new kinds of participation within the neighbourhood. Apart from the pedagogical objective, confronting design student with real problems and experimenting design as a social tool, Jesko Fezer's objective was to contribute actively to daily life of the inhabitants of St. Pauli district. According to him, design has to face the urgent issues of our time and that should be done in collaboration with people who are directly concerned. This service was pro bono, but the stakeholders had to be fully involved in the process and not just let the designer muddle through it. Design students searched on-site solutions based on conditions and resources available, avoiding “paternalistic care”, claiming the resident’s participation. Their goal was to collaborate in order to increase people's autonomy.

In a rather amusing and highly sarcastic essay, Friedrich von Borries and Jens-Uwe Fischer, compare the Public Design Support project to the activity of the May Brigade in the Soviet Union. The architect Ernst May, famous for his project “New Frankfurt”, willing to improve social housing in the second half of the 1920s, was employed by the Soviet Union Government to meet the growing demands on
affordable housing in new Siberian industrial cities. According to authors, May's intervention in dwellings of soviet citizens had a political impact on their subversive potential:

“A person with a lovely functional apartment with a modern built-in kitchen won’t want to overthrow power structures” (Borries, Fischer, 2016, p.79)

They draw a parallel between May Brigade and the students of Studio Experimental Design and insinuate that their involvement in St. Pauli district is just a question of sweetening the pill of a Neoliberal system.

Even though this kind of criticism could be perceived as justified, nevertheless, those precarious experiences will evolve into new model for the next generation of designers. For the designers who make the choice to be involved in this transformation the challenge is complex. It goes beyond material things, it’s about designing infrastructure and inventing the strategies to improve the quality of life. They see design as an independent critical practice. Their projects, mostly self-initiated, aims to establish the interaction with prosumers and to design a social fabric together. They use design as a tool against the erosion of critical thought. This kind of designer compromise the integrity of the dominant system and by doing this, it opens new horizons for experimental methods and for changes.

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