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Title: Defining Design as Activism

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Abstract

In this article I argue that current conceptualizations of design as activism are often weak or narrow, and don't stretch to the broader landscape of social movements from which most activism is born. Drawing on concepts of activism from social movement research and conventional activist practice, we can formulate a more useful, robust characterization of design as activism. Such a definition helps designers and social movement actors gain a better understanding of the spatial and material possibilities of design's role in activism. It makes design activism more accessible within the field of design, and also to wider constituencies

Defining Design as Activism

We are familiar with conventional activist scenes—a group of people, often by putting their bodies on the line, hold a strike or a march to resist the status quo, call for social change, and thus influence decision makers and public opinion. We are perhaps less familiar with how structures (such as buildings) or objects (such as furniture or tools), in their design processes and physical manifestations, also have a role in resisting the status quo, calling for change and thus influencing decision makers. In this article I propose a way to define design as activism. I first briefly describe the term “activism” before reporting on current understandings of design activism and on the use of social movement studies to define it more clearly.

Activism involves taking action that makes a claim for change on behalf of a wronged, excluded or neglected group—it is driven by the identification of a wrongdoing or problem that needs changing.¹ Jordan describes activism as a moral undertaking because it seeks to put forward a vision for a better society.² Note that this characterization suggests that activism can be progressive as well as regressive, visionary as well as reformist or reactionary. For example, Jordan points to the U.S. Patriot movement as reactionary. Other sociologists have documented how white separatists frame claims for change in terms of “pride” and “heritage” often used by other minorities.³ For the purposes of this paper I focus on activism that fits generally within the rubric of sustainability, which emphasizes a goal of long term thriving and well being of human and ecological systems.

Isn't all design activism?

Interest in design for social impact, public service design, and design activism has been rising, yet in conversation it is also common to hear the suggestion that since most design seeks to improve the conditions of life for people, most of it must, in some senses, be activism. This argument is sometimes bolstered by the idea that architecture, in particular, has long been influenced by arts and intellectual movements, such as modernism, that contain ideas about a better society. Although these movements had some broad proposals for how society should be organized, they were also closely bound to commerce and aesthetics.⁴ Consider the contrast between the idea of “modernism” and a particular instance of activism. Modernism’s idea was that people could be made more equal and society made more fair through “truthful forms” in buildings and objects that united workers, designers and users. Contrast that with the bus boycott in 1950s America through which blacks demanded an end to segregated seating on buses.⁵ The former is an abstract ideology whereas the latter is targeted activism.

Although “good” design does typically work to bring about change, in its dominant forms, good design (usable, profitable, beautiful, meaningful) doesn’t usually constitute activism on behalf of excluded or neglected groups. Rather, it constitutes general improvements to daily life that are most often gained through private consumption, accessed according to the consumer’s ability to pay, whether the consumer is an individual, company, or other entity.

Characterizations of design activism to date

With increasing interest in design activism has come a range of implicit and explicit proposals for defining, or characterizing what constitutes design as activism. Found in both literature and practice, these proposals are useful, and below I bring them together to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches to date.

Unique cases defying classification

Recently several book treatments of design as activism have emerged. In architecture, for example, Bell and Wakeford's *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism* is a collection of essays centered largely on affordable housing. Another Book, Findley's *Building Change: Architecture, Politics and Cultural Agency*, examines four recent architectural projects that aim to represent previously marginalized peoples or causes, primarily through the design and construction of cultural centers. In terms of products, Fuad-Luke's *Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World*, offers a broad treatment of design activism.

Strikingly, both a reviewer of *Expanding Architecture* and Findley emphasize that design activism is so varied as to make each instance unique. Bernstein comments that he can't find a single rubric with which to compare the projects presented in *Expanding Architecture*; comparison is impossible and there's no way to generalize what architects should do as activists.⁶ Similarly Findley writes, "projects that explicitly take on the issues of cultural and political power, that are an overt reassertion of cultural agency and dignity, that seek to symbolically represent a formerly invisible people, or that have overt agendas for social change are, by their very definition, unique in almost every way."⁷ Fuad Luke's book includes so many diagrams, tables, and lists of the landscape for design activism that the reader is again left feeling that design activism is too varied for a single definition.

Conventional activism by designers

Design activism also takes up conventional activist approaches by designers. For example, Architecture 2030 used a "teach-in" to spread the word about design's role in climate change.⁸ Architects and Planners for Socially Responsible Design held a boycott against the design of new prisons.⁹ The Designers Accord also uses the conventional format of pledging or formally signing on to a set of positions, as in a conventional petition signing.¹⁰ These and other examples show that designers do use conventional activist formats, but this view falls short of looking at a more explicit role in activism for design structures, objects and processes.

Design elements of protest

A related theme in the literature concerns artefacts as elements of protest, including the nature of places for public protest, symbolic artifacts used in protest, and tools of protest. For example, Hatuka and Kallus profile Yitzak Rabin Square in Tel Aviv and note that the "architectural placemaking in the square has shaped public discourse by reinforcing certain formal patterns of congregating."¹¹ The square, site of the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, is highly controlled through barricades and surveillance. The authors document how the architecture of the site makes it powerful for both authorities who control it and crowds (as large as 400,000) who use it as a site of protest. Authors quote one political protester saying, "It is perceived as a place of power due to its size. Pictures of the crowd taken from the roofs convey that power."¹²

Hosey offers the example of the shantytowns built on US university campuses to protest university investment in apartheid South Africa. He profiles the shantytown built at Yale University and notes, "The shanties' aesthetic dissonance with their site expressed the moral irony that the protestors saw in the university's investments."¹³ He calls these "protest constructions" that reduce architecture to its most rudimentary form that still has social meaning, making them very concise. Cowan reports on another protest construction, the Aboriginal Tent

Embassy located adjacent to Australia's Federal Parliament. The structure symbolically reclaims land for the Aboriginal people, and the author calls this, "a rich architecture of land rights activism" and suggests that activists are, "deploying the architectural structure and symbol of the tent to reclaim the freedom to dwell nomadically across the Australian continent."¹⁴

Other examples show design more explicitly as a tool for activism. For instance, architects have created tree houses for protestors occupying threatened forests and designed protest housing (temporary housing erected illegally) to raise awareness of housing shortages.¹⁵ Boehnart describes how designers for UK's climate camp created shields emblazoned with large photographs of faces representing the diversity of the world's population (Figure 1).¹⁶ The camp itself is an example of a "protest construction" such as the shantytowns mentioned above. These examples show that design does have a role in conventional protest, but leaves design bound to these conventional formats, rather than considering how design might bring its own formats and mechanisms to the notion of activism.



Figure 1: Climate Camp human shields, photo courtesy Kristian Buus

Collections of cause-oriented case studies

One of the most common ways that the field of design has characterized activism is as groups of cause-specific cases. Examples include green buildings or humanitarian design services. Other common themes are open or participatory design, universal design (for example, design serving all ages), and community design. These sets of cases are often collected to demonstrate principles for best practice related to the cause. While these are useful and productive, they offer specialized definitions for specific kinds of design activism.

Critical Design and Critical Architecture

Another common way that design has taken up "activism" is through the notion of criticism and criticality. Critical architecture arose in response to "the Faustian bargain made with capitalist development in the first stages of modernism."¹⁷ For example, Barber notes that critical architecture takes "a resistant stance towards cultural norms."¹⁸ Baird suggests that critical architecture resists the commoditization of culture.¹⁹ Hays sees critical architecture as resisting "conciliatory representation of external forces," and at its best, producing new cultural knowledge.²⁰ An example might be Daniel Libeskind's Holocaust Museum in Germany or Maya

Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC.

Bowen cites “critical artefacts” as those that examine ideologies embedded in products, often providing a proposition against which the audience balances their own values.²¹ Further Millen suggests that critical design engages with cultural experimentation and criticism by presenting singular, radical or confrontational objects, sometimes known as “fictional products.” An example is the French fries voting ballot designed by Release1, provocatively questioning whether MacDonalds' market reach could be leveraged to get people to vote, by incorporating peel-off voting ballots into fries cartons (Figure 2).



Figure 2: fries voting ballot, photo courtesy Stefane Barbeau

Critical design examples often skirt the twin issues of making specific claims for change and of clearly identifying how the change benefits a wronged or excluded group. Instead they show design's efforts to change or challenge cultural discourse.

The protest of bad design

It is worth noting that some researchers within sociology and political science, upon hearing of “design activism,” assumed that it meant “protesting against bad design.” Although design literature describes cases of protest against design proposals (often on the basis of historic preservation, aesthetics, or contextual suitability), this is typically not what designers have in mind when they discuss design activism.

Within design we see a variety of characterizations of design activism ranging from unique cases that defy classification, to very specific elements in conventional protest, to cause oriented design and critical design. We can now compare these characterizations with how the fields of political science and sociology characterize activism.

Investigating conventional activism

As an umbrella term, “activism” can refer to all kinds of routine work that an advocacy organization might undertake. For example we characterize the work of Greenpeace as “environmental activism.” All of the group's activities could be seen broadly as part of its activism, from sending out membership renewal letters to blockading nuclear shipments. All of the group's activities contribute to its claim: *we need to do more to protect the environment*. Yet sociologists and political scientists would distinguish the blockade of nuclear shipments as a

separate category that they call “protest,” “collective action,” or “political resistance.”

The terms “resistance” and “protest” connote a more specific element of activism; the terms refer to tactics that “use unconventional methods of political participation” in efforts to persuade authorities to make changes sought by activists.²² The terms also typically connote that activists’ proposed changes are contentious. Taylor and Van Dyke suggest that “protest” encompasses a wide variety of actions ranging from routine formats (such as voting, where a group might turn up and refuse to vote) to confrontational approaches (such as strikes or even violence). Protest tactics can also express political messages through cultural forms such as music, film, literature, or ritual. These authors highlight how social movement organizations are known for “the strategic use of novel, dramatic, unorthodox, and non institutionalized forms of political expression to try to shape public opinion and put pressure on those in positions of authority.”²³ In this sense resistance and protest are visibly public, often taking the form of an event, making the term “protest event” common in this literature.

Beissinger suggests that we can identify particular protest events by the way they seek to interrupt the routine and the normal. He understands events to, “challenge normalized practices, modes of causation, or systems of authority” and further, he comments, “events are purposeful forms of action whose perpetrators aim to transform rather than reproduce, to overturn or alter that which, in the absence of the event, others would take for granted.”²⁴ Protest or resistance events are essentially disruptive.

In addition to disrupting, activism always reveals, unveils, or frames an issue. In a classic sense, activism often reveals an injustice or wrongdoing, but it may also frame a better alternative—it may be generative.²⁵ For example a “teach in” may provide an alternative to the authorized curriculum. Maney and Oliver argue against considering only “disruptive action” when they assess protest *forms* and protest *content*. The authors note that in western countries, many actions previously thought of as “protests” (such as marches, rallies, or leafleting) are now legal, and even routine.²⁶ These authors argue for considering a wider range of “carriers” for protest messages (what scholars often term “claims for change”), including ceremonies, symposiums, displays and exhibits, speeches, or fund raisers.²⁷ I argue that this interpretation sets a precedent for looking to designed structures, objects, and processes, and their often visual and spatial messages, as methods of unveiling and framing issues.

Although most studies of protest and resistance focus on collective action, some geographers as well as sociologists of technology, have explored the idea that spaces and objects can also serve as the basis of disruption or unveiling. In geography, research suggests that physical spaces can serve not only as “stage sets” for events, but also as “places of resistance” that have a role in disrupting routine practices and unveiling claims for change.²⁸ For example, protest festivals (protestivals) often contain a “temporary autonomous zone,” a space that creates the reality of an imagined future.²⁹

In terms of technologies or products, Hess makes the case, through studies of wind turbines and medical treatments, that material culture, or artifacts themselves, create the disruption of routine practices in some social movements.³⁰ Disability activism highlights this disruption since the main transformation of this movement over the past few decades has been from the medical model that emphasized “impairment” of individuals toward a focus on disabling and inaccessible

facilities, tools, and places.³¹ These explorations offer a precedent for how structures and objects play a role in disruption and in revealing problems and proposed solutions. Although these studies accept that material culture, or physical objects and structures, have a role in disruption and unveiling, they have not looked at the role of design in shaping these objects or structures.

Social movement scholars highlight the fact that in many cases, people turn to protest and resistance because they don't have access to institutionalized power or because institutionalized channels for social change have led to a dead end.³² Tarrow highlights the role of collective action within contentious politics, noting, "Collective action becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities."³³ Terms such as unaccepted, non-institutionalized, unorthodox, and unconventional give a definite sense of the contentious nature of activist claims. Taylor and Van Dyke introduce the notion of activists (or collective action) targeting a wide range of institutional types including, "religion, medicine, the military, education, the mass media, as well as the political [government] arena."³⁴ Finally, most scholars of social movements note that activism is effective only as part of a broader movement or campaign.

Defining design in activism (protest/resistance) terms

The main finding from this overview of definitions and terms is that to provide a useful definition of "design activism" we need to borrow from the concepts of protest and resistance. So far we've considered two key elements of "resistance/protest." First, it calls for change through the use of unconventional methods, especially the disruption of regularly reproduced practices, systems and structures of institutionalized, or "dominant," power. Second, resistance/protest publicly frames and reveals issues, all with the aim of bringing about change on behalf of a wronged, excluded or neglected group. I've argued that there is a precedent for considering how these two elements of disruption and framing might occur in forms, such as structures and objects, in addition to collective action events. Along with these two elements we've also considered a third aspect of activism, how it makes claims for change on behalf of an excluded, wronged, or disadvantaged group. From this overview we can extract four basic criteria to define design as activism:

- It publicly reveals or frames a problem or challenging issue.
- It makes a contentious claim for change (it calls for change) based on that problem or issue.
- It works on behalf of a neglected, excluded or disadvantaged group.
- It disrupts routine practices, or systems of authority, which gives it the characteristic of being unconventional or unorthodox—outside traditional channels of change.

My research involved examining hundreds of cases of design against these criteria, which allowed a fairly thorough consideration of the many questions they raise. Before discussing these questions, it is useful to look at a few worked examples to show how a variety of cases meet the criteria for the definition of design activism. I show four cases (Table 1, following page).

Table 1: applying the definition to example cases

Park(ing) Day: REBAR's "pocket" parks in metered parking spaces
Claim: too much outdoor city space is dedicated to private cars
On behalf of: pedestrians, users without cars
Disruption: disrupts the use patterns of metered parking and introduces a range of alternative visions for productive, and meaningful use of street space.
Reveal/frame: reframes the metered parking space as "an inexpensive short-term lease for a plot of precious urban real estate" while also highlighting the spatial cost of cars.



photo by Andrea Sure, courtesy of Rebar

Athletic head scarves for Muslim women that comply with hijab: designed by Cindy van den Bremen when Dutch schools forced muslim girls to remove head scarves in gym class for safety reasons.
Claim: religions minorities have rights to follow their practices
On behalf of: Muslim women
Disruption: rather than taking the "pro" or "anti" stance of politicians and religious groups, the approach finds a previously unconsidered middle ground.
Reveal/frame: headscarves are not the problem.



photo by Peter Stigter, courtesy of Capsters

Wayne Lyman Morse US Courthouse: green but also highly secure, by Morphosis Architects
Claim: despite vulnerability as a terrorist target and other security needs, the courthouse should re-imagine the public square, not be a fortress.
On behalf of: citizens navigating the justice system
Disruption: the building puts spatial emphasis on the courtrooms, highlighting the places where justice is served and daylights to convey openness and transparency
Reveal/frame: frames the courthouse's role in the functioning of democracy and its values of fairness and openness.



photo courtesy of the City of Eugene, OR

The Tsunami safe(r) house: A project by the MIT Senseable City Lab proposing new housing form
Claim: Sri Lankan fishermen can settle the coast despite tropical storms
On behalf of: subsistence fishermen
Disruption: didn't assume that the destruction of houses is uniform in tropical storms, rather houses built perpendicular to the coast tended to survive the Tsunami and this could be enhanced in combination with specific construction techniques
Reveal/frame: the project revealed viable alternatives to resettlement of coastal communities.

photo courtesy of MIT Senseable City Lab, senseable.mit.edu

Although drawing on the definitions of protest and resistance, for two reasons I use the term design “activism” rather than terms such as “social protest design” or “design resistance.” First, as professionals, designers are in an exclusive group that has some interests in maintaining existing power relations; protest and resistance might jeopardize the meaning of the profession. However, there is a tradition of *activist* practice, if not overt protest, in the professions, with law and medicine being two obvious examples.³⁵ Second, my findings suggest that rather than being resistant, many cases of design activism are generative—they frame a better alternative. Although the “generative” literature is smaller, writing about the generative capacity of technology-oriented movements, Hess comments, “They not only oppose certain types of new technologies and products but they develop and diffuse alternatives.”³⁶

Discussion of the definition

The examples in the boxes highlight several aspects of design activism. First, they show that almost any instance of design activism has to work as activism, *and something else*, at the same time. The activist content sits alongside more traditional design criteria such as function, aesthetic, cost, or usability. Although less obvious, this constraint is also present for conventional activism which often appeals to participants as much for offering chances to express loyalty to friends, forge new social relationships, create a sense of identity, or improve skills.

Second, the examples show that design activism works in many ways. Sen classifies types of activist work into five categories: community organizing, service provision, advocacy, mobilization, and solidarity.³⁷ Of the examples above, international Park(ing) day works more akin to community organizing, where people organize themselves to fight for change. The safety barrier or the housing proposed in the tsunami safe(r) house reflect humanitarian services. At the level of advocacy, members of the elite (such as the federal judge guiding the courthouse or professional designers) advocate on behalf of a wronged group (such as Muslim women in the headscarf example). Some of these examples, in turn, also work at the level of solidarity, aiming to change the terms of cultural discourse, broadly revealing problems with the status quo and framing alternatives.

Understanding these types of activist work helps us make sense of the different ways design activism has been defined to date, with some viewing it more strictly as co-design or participatory design (akin to community organizing) while others, perhaps on the “critical design” end of the spectrum, see it more at the level cultural discourse. Table 2 shows this spectrum of activist work with design examples (Table 2, following page).

Table 2: types of change (activist) work and design versions of this work		
type of activist work	common form of design work	example cases
organizing: developing the community's ability to bring about change	co-design and other participatory, self design processes	city hacking in parking space parks
services: providing facilities, training, professional services (eg legal advice)	humanitarian design services and structures	emergency/recovery shelter by groups like Architecture for Humanity
advocacy: working on behalf of others, often without their direct involvement	eco-design, advocating for nature, or responding to a cause-oriented ideas competition for a distant location	green building of the US Courthouse
mobilization: bringing together large numbers of participants for an action, without expectation of their further involvement	Designer use of conventional activist methods, design elements of conventional protest	Architecture 2030 teach-in, Designers Accord pledge
solidarity: engaging with cultural discourse to change the terms of debate	critical architecture and design	french fry voting ballot, Rem Koolhaas' Educatorium at the University of Utrecht

Third, the examples also show that like many types of activist claims, these projects primarily call for reform, rather than transformation. Many classic social movements were (or are) reformist, for example, calling for the expansion of rights (to women or to minorities), rather than changing the types of rights (voting, property ownership) that are on offer. Reformist activism may not be “unconventional” in terms of the changes it proposes, but to gain attention it is frequently unconventional, even radical, in how it disrupts the status quo.

Discussion of the Criteria

In the following section I explore the types of questions that emerge in applying the criteria from the definition.

Criterion 1: disruption

An important aspect of design activism is how it can emerge at different points along the design “lifecycle.” Compared to a more classic protest event, such as a march, design unfolds across time. Most design projects pass through phases of research, ideation, development, construction (fabrication), use, and de-commissioning. Arguably any phase of the lifecycle can serve as a point of activism.

For example in fashion design hacking, users decode contemporary couture and “reassemble” it in new versions.³⁸ The activism arguably occurs in the decoding and reassembling process rather

than the outcome, which may not be recognized as anything other than a “nice dress.” For green buildings much of the disruption occurs in the construction of highly innovative structures that building occupants might ultimately not be aware of. Activism might occur in rating systems, for example for green products, which potentially cover the whole lifecycle.

Activist “disruptions” might also occur when a structure is launched or used. An example is the Neptune Foundation’s barge-mounted, floating swimming pool designed to bring free recreation to under served communities of New York City while at the same time serving as a mobile public park space (Figure 3).³⁹ In this case the swimming pool in use reveals a claim for better recreational facilities and disrupts people’s expectations about park space.



Figure 3: Neptune Foundation floating swimming pool by Architect Jonathan Kirschenfeld. Photo by Philippe Baumann

Criterion 2: Framing a problem

A key question underlying the criteria for framing a problem concerns who has credentials to do the framing—and to do it through design. Although some might assume that “true” design activism has to be initiated by designers, the examples from the boxes above show that a range of actors, including governments, nonprofit groups and design practices, deploy design as activism. Whether design activism is instigated by designers, or by activist clients, it is still the work of the designer to use spatial and material means to frame issues and articulate disruptions to the status quo.

What about the legitimacy of various actors to frame messages for change? Can a government employee, successful entrepreneur, or “starchitect” be an activist, or do these actors, by default of their positions, represent the elite and the status quo? Research in social movements indicates that elites are often best positioned to advocate on behalf of others, as well as to engage in the cultural discourse of solidarity work.⁴⁰

There are spaces for activism across all three sectors of the economy (public, private, nonprofit). Consider, for example, the late Anita Roddick, of the Body Shop, who promoted a range of causes and linked business practices to processes of social change, for example through “fair trade.”⁴¹ In terms of design we might consider Thom Mayne of Morphosis Architects who, although successful in aesthetic, commercial, and “cultural elite” terms, has also pioneered the application of design to problems of neglect and disadvantage in areas of public space,

transparency in the judicial system, and public education, among others. Actors from each sector of the economy interact and push each other to address needed changes.

Criterion 3: Claims for change

A large number of design projects fall into the category of making weak and hardly contentious claims for change. Weak examples are businesses that take social or environmental actions because it's good for business, or because it forestalls costly regulation. The primary purpose of these actions is to support the financial bottom line. They indicate that earlier activist efforts are becoming mainstream and these actions are not disruptive, but rather, routine profit seeking.

Successful activism often later becomes the "norm." For example, Trevor Baylis' wind up radio was initially developed to bring radio communication about health and AIDS to rural African residents, but the wind up radio later became a global commercial success.⁴² This is not to denigrate activist work that moves into a normative position, as this is the preferred progression for successful social change. It is simply to acknowledge that once it becomes the norm, it doesn't any longer meet the definition of activism.

A range of high-end and economic development projects also suggest a category where claims for social change often seem to be of secondary importance. High-end projects include hotels, spas, restaurants, retail interiors, or "high art" complexes (museums, symphony halls, and opera houses). Typically any claims for change embodied in design in this context are either used to market high-end facilities or benefit people who can afford high-end facilities. Economic development projects include professional sports stadiums, office parks, or convention centers. I reiterate that in some cases, for example with eco design, it's possible that the design of a high end facility makes a pioneering call for change on behalf of nature, perhaps even setting a precedent that others follow. However this is usually not the case.

Other categories of design raise questions about whether making a claim for change is their primary purpose, for example:

- Medical/disability equipment
- Redevelopment of derelict/underutilized land
- Security and Emergency preparedness
- Activism on behalf of design (preserving classic examples of modern design)

I examine the first two categories here. Medical equipment can most often be characterized as "good design" on behalf of general users, since the products do not in themselves argue for change on behalf of a particular disadvantaged group. However, there are exceptions, such as the Adia portable fetal ultrasound "blanket," a conceptual design by two students (Eran Weinberg and Sal Primo) at the Art Center College of Design. The blanket helps women in remote rural regions get accurate fetal development information and avoid complications associated with giving birth en route to distant clinics.⁴³

In contrast to general medical equipment, design for "consumer" disability equipment generally does meet the criteria for being primarily for the purpose of calling for change. Disabled people are frequently excluded and neglected, particularly by their physical environments. And although there is a "market" for disability equipment, disabled people do not "choose" this market from among many that are suitable. Even in the disability category, questions arise around obesity or addictions. Are these disabilities or lifestyle choices?

We should also note that areas that are already regulated, such as environmental performance or wheelchair accessibility, are often still the subject of activism. As mentioned above, most activism calls for reform, including advocating for stronger or smarter regulation.

A number of cases concerned wasteland, derelict spaces, or large-scale urban redevelopment. Small-scale cases are often easy to identify as activism. Large-scale urban redevelopment, for example waterfronts, transit systems, or city wide urban plans (such as New York City's 20-year sustainability plan) often don't qualify. Ultimately these broad plans have large components concerning economic growth. Although economic growth could help everyone, evidence shows it typically most helps those who are already well off. In addition, cities have a duty of care for long term planning, making these plans good practice rather than activism. Even so, in rare cases a plan may represent a disruptive call for change. An example is Helsinki, Finland's city-wide lighting plan, the first of its kind, making the claim that we should better address ecological and human concerns around lighting; for example light pollution.⁴⁴

Criterion 4: Excluded or Neglected Groups

How do we determine the validity of a "neglected or wronged" group? For example I consider nature and ecological systems as excluded groups. Some of the other groups that emerged as questions against the criteria included:

- the public at large
- children
- gender (women)
- religious groups
- prisoners

Below I look at the first two groups in more detail to indicate possible approaches to these questions.

Public at large

I argue that in many cases the public at large can be seen as a neglected or deprived group.

Consider the following types of cases:

- Primary and secondary education
- Public libraries and other public buildings
- Transit stations and public transit vehicles, pedestrian bridges
- Streetscapes and street furniture

The public realm has been consistently neglected over the past few decades and although the public at large is neglected, those who suffer most because of this disinvestment are poorer and/or marginal populations.⁴⁵ If we accept this characterization of the public realm, then improving bus shelters or parks, for example, is likely to have the biggest impact on the least well off members of society, although everyone can benefit.

Can this argument about a "neglected public" be generalized to all public facilities – such as public libraries, transit stations and publicly funded elementary and secondary schools? In many cases it can, but there are shades of grey. Consider for example distinguishing between outstanding design for a privileged private school, design improvements on behalf of a disadvantaged school, and design on behalf of education (such as radical proposals for flexible education pods).

A similar gradation occurs with large public buildings. I discussed the federal courthouse earlier but when do design qualities of new public buildings frame issues or cause disruption in spatial norms? For many public buildings, such as the recent public library in Salt Lake City by Moshe Safdie, the case can be made (Figure 4).⁴⁶ As the head librarian says, “A library is an institution that best embodies our society’s values... Egalitarian, free, open to all--a place that prepares all who enter to participate in our democracy, and in our civic life.”⁴⁷



Figure 4: Salt Lake City Public Library by Moshe Safdie. Photo by BellaOra Studios, courtesy Salt Lake City Public Library

Children

In general children are a vulnerable segment of our population, and I acknowledge that children are probably “under served” by society-at-large. Yet I don’t think we can make the case that all design for children disproportionately serves excluded or disadvantaged children. Consider the case of Kopmas inventive, aesthetically pleasing playground equipment that challenges children in new ways. This equipment could be found at wealthy private schools or in the parks of affluent suburbs. The play equipment could plausibly be deployed as part of an activist design, but in itself doesn’t seem to carry activist content. There are plenty of cases where children do meet the criteria of being neglected or excluded, for example at inner city schools or at AIDS orphanages in developing countries.

Implications of criteria discussion

Applying these criteria to worked examples shows that defining design as activism is an art, rather than a science, because activist content in design is always bound up with the other types of content (function, structure, aesthetic, etc.) and the bar for activist content moves. Any structure or object is tied into a system that colors it, and this problem is arguably amplified by globalization. Many times the evaluation must be made on a case-by-case basis, and although two reasonable people might ultimately disagree on some cases, many cases clearly fit the criteria.

Conclusion

Why worry about definitions and criteria—shouldn’t we just act? There are several reasons why a robust definition of design as activism might be useful. First, we need a definition if we want to study design activism, for example, to develop theories and practices. The definition brings some rigor to discussions of design as activism and lets participants in the discussion clarify their positions with respect to some specific criteria.

Second, by borrowing concepts from accepted notions of activism, we avoid having to “reinvent

the wheel” while at the same time acquiring language that speaks across disciplinary boundaries. This is important because as Fuad Luke observes, in activist terms designers mainly talk to themselves.⁴⁸ While this internal talk is useful on many levels and may partly be the nature of undertaking activism from a professional perspective, thinking through the definition of design as activism gives designers a language for communicating more broadly.

Finally, a definition derived from conventional activism is one way to position designers more squarely and consciously within politics and provide them with specific conceptual tools for “taking action.” This contrasts with explorations of “the political,” which tend to be more abstract (for example at the level of cultural discourse) and often focus on design’s role in maintaining dominant patterns of power. By contrast, activism’s purpose is to provide a more focused challenge to dominant patterns of power and overturn them in favor of something better. In this sense the concepts of disruption, framing, unveiling, and neglected groups become tools for devising activist design projects.

Regarding the dearth of political understanding in design, Frampton comments, “At this juncture one can hardly emphasize enough how the substance of political process needs to be articulated within the field, both pedagogically and otherwise.”⁴⁹ Earlier I mentioned that activism is only effective in conjunction with broader campaigns and movements, and this is something the definition itself does not capture, although it does raise issues of political power. Boulding emphasizes how political power is but a means to an end. He notes, “power is a concept without meaning in the absence of human valuations and human decision. Decision is a choice among a range or set of images of the future that we think are feasible.”⁵⁰ And it is design’s ability to help portray, both visually and experientially, visions of a better future that makes further exploration of design activism worthwhile.

Author Bio

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