

Designing Politics: the limits of design

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What are the limits of design in addressing the political and/or when has design not been enough? A collection of thought pieces written by Theatrum Mundi's Designing Politics Working Group following a workshop at the Villa Vassiliev in Paris on 25th May 2016. This working group is supported by the Global Cities Chair at the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris.

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As a result, design becomes limited - and counterproductive - when encountering the political unless it recognizes its reductionism, which is effective yet bounded to sclerotize and to ossify reality, or becomes aware of the political-economic implication of its own label. Calling something an act of design (as much as calling something politics) goes well beyond a technical or aesthetic judgement; it becomes an act of legitimization. And, as any act of legitimization, it entails an act of exclusion. As a result, when a fishermen fidgets with a net and comes up with a more effective way of weighing it down or a slum dweller devises a better system of water drainage, their acts are classified as ingenuity, practical sense, or local know-how. Conversely, when the well-dressed university-educated cappuccino-sipping “creative” builds a chair, that act is of “design.” Exactly the same way in which, when in a riot the unemployed loots a betting shop or a shopping mall, hundreds of voices raise to define such act as non-political, and corner it into irrationality, blind rage, or shopping with violence, while celebrating riding a bike to work as a political act.

So to conclude, two elements are central to this analysis of the relation between design and the political. Firstly, we need to recognize the very use of the label “design” as part of a political and economic order, in which value and legitimacy are created. Design as a category, therefore, does not just relate to the political, it is its own political-economic project, one in which value is generated through uniqueness. The proliferation of the word “design” conjures and it is symptomatic of a post-Fordist system of creation of surplus value, one in which the uniqueness of a piece, the ingenuity of its design, and what the resulting object comes to signify and represent in terms of identity is celebrated, and valued, over the mass production and celebration for seriality that dominated Fordist modes of production, circulation, and consumption. Secondly, we need to acknowledge that design is an act of reduction, and therefore of institutionalization, that creates a reality. In this sense, the ultimate political act is not that of designing, but rather of hijacking, hacking, and cracking the design, of finding its limits and backdoors and opening them up to challenges.

Pushpa Arabindoo Radical Design: From Ideology to Practice

Unusually, we find ourselves at a rare, feel-good historical moment, when we are supposed to be marking and (if we dare) celebrating 500 years of Thomas More’s inspirational text *Utopia*—an appropriate conjuncture to think ‘widely about the politics of design, and designing for politics’. And perhaps, with a little nudge, a gentle push, we can even realise Aureli’s ‘prophecy’ of a shift towards a repoliticisation of architecture, embracing once again the possibilities of radical critique.¹ This would of course require design to go beyond the mellow compromise of ‘radical realism’, a concession common in design as it remains caught within the vain demands of professionalism. Practically, it also means that design needs to roll its sleeves up to occupy a central role in restoring the public investment programme in housing, infrastructure, health, education and other associated welfare schemes that are now nearly extinct. In this matter, design cannot be faulted for not trying. The primal role of design in New Labour’s Urban Renaissance Agenda in the UK is well known, especially in driving key schemes such as the Building Schools for Future, one that came in for stinging criticism. Given this scepticism, should design try yet again to influence socio-political agendas? Would its efforts be predictably limited to meddling gestures? If so, is this simply (not) enough?

The politics of tactical
architecture cannot be so
easily dismissed.

Swyngedouw’s cryptic statement, that architecture cannot be an emancipatory project but architects can, encapsulate best the limits of design in addressing the political.² While he follows Tafuri’s argument that architecture is removed from any larger critique of capitalism and its unfolding cultural logic, he draws attention to the emergence of insurgent

architects who “may tentatively open a space for thinking through and acting on the necessity for a new socio-spatial order articulated around the disavowed signifiers of equality, freedom, solidarity and common management of the commons”.³ The risk here is that the metamorphosis of designers into political subjects takes place amidst a post-political consensus that is not only reactionary but also forestalls the articulation of design as a counter-narrative to the facets of neoliberal urbanism. It is this context that frames Brenner’s scepticism of tactical urbanism and insurgent architecture where he cautions that even though such design defies politics as we know it, these gestures are unable to disrupt basic rule-regimes associated with market-oriented, growth-first urban development.⁴ This is a tentative criticism which is cautious not only about these small-scale interventions but also fears about their wider currency rooted as they are in a localised politics of subversion.

And yet, the politics of tactical architecture cannot be so easily dismissed without thoroughly exploring its practical abilities to offer a robust interpretive frame for understanding a variety of emergent urban design experiments in cities across the global North and South, an exercise involving not just joining the dots but also discerning a more nuanced and complex pattern. It also means reaching a point where the tactics of insurgent design are a rule and not an exception, a difficult prospect when faced with the continued corporatisation of design. More than its ideological association with capitalism, our concern here is with the practice-dominated prioritisation of design as a technological fix. It means design as a process that is less concerned with social analysis (despite repeated assertions) or the larger questions of political economy, and more with the demands of developers, engineers and planners. A continued focus on the broader system of real estate-led development rules ensures that design remains caught within the entrapment of a ‘field’ with less chances of developing a sophisticated discourse as a discipline. For the latter to happen, we need to think of design not only as a meta-narrative but also in terms of its everyday practice. A first step is to loosen the rigid hierarchical impositions of scale where architecture, urban design and planning operate at distinct micro and macro levels. It requires a radical rethinking of design not as a spatially circumscribed intervention but as a multiscalar process cutting

across multiple sites, places, and territories. This is an issue when design follows the conventional norms of project-based initiatives with a tightly defined redline boundary, one that does not interrupt the broader systems of property based investment and displacement. In order to overcome this challenge, we will need to return to the drawing board, or back to the classroom, i.e. reconsider the pedagogy of radical design as practice. In all likelihood, we will be opening a new can of worms, a confrontation that we unfortunately cannot avoid.

1 P.V. Aureli, *The project of autonomy: Politics and architecture within and against capitalism* (Buell Center/FORuM Project and Princeton Architectural Press, 2008)

2 E. Swyngedouw, *On the impossibility of an emancipatory architecture: The deadlock of critical theory, insurgent architects, and the beginning of politics*, in *Can architecture be an emancipatory project? Dialogues on architecture and the left* (Zero Books, 2016)

3 (n.p.)

4 N. Brenner, *Is ‘tactical urbanism’ an alternative to neoliberal urbanism?* http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/587-is-tactical-urbanism-an-alternative-to-neoliberal-urbanism (2015)