
This is a design imaginary

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Abstract

I propose to research design as the object of research. We may as well start with researching ourselves, the designers and our practices, as we acknowledge that methods and research objects constitute each other, just as material worlds and our imaginations reconfigure each other. I draw on 15 years of design practice to argue that the thorny issues of the world can be tackled by a design (research) that is an epistemological device, sensitive to itself changing in practice alongside the issues it is tackling.

Author Keywords

Reconfiguration; design; imaginary; design research

CSS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing~Human computer interaction (HCI);**

Introduction

It is exactly the task in the workshop outline, to describe the “complex, thorny issues” that design has taken as its “research objects”, that I propose to turn inside out. I declare **design** to be a complex, thorny issue, and I am proposing to **research design** as the **object and practice of research**. I argue that design – quite the opposite to being an agent of change – has limited effect in many settings, and may through its claim of agency actually obscure change effects unfolding [6]. Design may be effective for designers

(and others) if it is conceptualized as an epistemological practice and object that changes within itself, and with it, the world. Seeing design as a material-reflective practice-object can enable its potential of learning-knowing and effecting-changing.

Experiencing design as a practitioner

I worked with smart energy consumer applications, and before that I worked with local government bodies across the UK enabling them to engage digitally with citizens and civic initiatives. In 15 years of design practice in the UK and Europe, I experienced design differently to the way I was trained to do design. Design is postulating its ability to drive change, center humans, and make the world better [3, 4]. However, it was by far not enough to focus on analyzing, modelling and evaluating the interactions in the systems I worked on. Underneath and in between I was involved in negotiating design's influence within the organizations, their regulatory frameworks, and the many people and teams. There were in-between-factors for a design's success that weren't visible but sense-able and clearly influencing how things were going. I knew that the design work I was doing had fierce competition in negotiating how designs evolved.

Rethinking design as an epistemological practice and object

I eventually did my PhD in the topic of "design as a thing". Rather than continuing to take designerly ways of knowing (and effecting) for granted, as they were postulated, I researched design as a practice of re-ordering; as a taking apart and reassembling tasks, persons/roles, and their hierarchies [6]. Continuing on from this work, I use concepts from design practice that refuse the truth/construction dichotomy, such as

ambiguity, probes, design fiction [1,2, 5], and combine these with the sociomaterial concept of reconfiguration [7, 8]. Sociomateriality is the acknowledgement that material worlds are the effects of enacted relations that are open to reconfiguration in practice [8].

I investigate design as a practice where design artefacts/objects/figurations/imaginaries are deployed as agents of change within wider organizational practices. Design imaginaries are design artefacts, models, or objects; they are representations and propositions that describe how the future should be. But instead of being plans that materialize (invisibly) the realities they propose, they are active elements negotiating what will effectively happen. Imaginaries participate in the enactment of material conditions, and through this, have the potential to change these material conditions. Imaginaries are the agents of reconfiguration. They reconfigure material relations. Even this extended abstract is an imaginary, an artefact reconfiguring the future of design.

Designers create imaginaries to support them in the intervening in practices. Visibility on the relations of the imaginaries (through observing and understanding as such) allows an effective collaboration between designers and imaginaries in reconfiguring practices. Attending to, tracing, and making imaginaries is a practice of design (research) that may make design more effective. If the format of imaginaries is (not only visible but) open, it may also allow participation of others.

Design is an epistemological device that enables the reflecting and constituting of the world, its researching and knowing, its being and changing. It is a method to

visualize and trace sociomaterial relations that constitute and enact material conditions. Design is a method to reconfigure material relations through design imaginaries. Design imaginaries, as reconfiguring artefacts, are collaborators whose effect is visible within the relations of design practice. Design can be cultivated as an epistemological practice of learning and reconfiguration.

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