

THE POLITICS OF DESIGN, DESIGN AS POLITICS

Christo Sims

Design is on the march. Terms and practices that once circulated primarily within the fairly circumscribed worlds of professional designers—“charrettes,” “prototyping,” “brainstorming,” and so forth—have permeated worlds as diverse as business management, statecraft, and public education. Ethnographers have not been immune from this extension, and, if anything, some of our most esteemed practitioners have helped to promote it. For Bruno Latour (2008), the spread of the word design attests to the collapse of faith in modernist narratives while also signaling more humble, democratic, and open-ended ways to make collective futures. For Paul Rabinow, George Marcus, James Faubion, and Tobias Rees (2008), the practices of professional designers offer promising ways for rethinking contemporary modes of anthropological inquiry and textual production, and the design studio represents an exciting model for teaching and learning ethnographic practices. For Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2013), “prototyping” is not only a term of art among select communities of practice; it is also a more general model for how a polity might mutually prefigure configurations of objects and sociality.

While ethnographers who have recently advocated for design have done so in different ways, they tend to share a desire to not just interpret the world but also to try to change it. Put differently, many ethnographers’ recent interest in partnering with designers can be seen in part as an interest in exploring new modes of doing a material politics.¹ Given this renewed interest in the political possibilities of design, this short chapter explores some of the ways that design does and can do political work. After offering a brief rationale for why ethnographers should examine design as a mode of doing politics, I primarily focus on three, often intra-related, political processes in which design might play a part: prescribing, publicizing, and proposing.² The chapter ends with a brief exercise in, and argument for, attending to the unevenly situated character of design-ethnography as a mode of doing politics.

Romancing Design

While couplings of professional designers and ethnographers have a long and complex history (cf. Dourish 2006; Suchman 2011), recent proponents of ethnography-design pairings tend

to be forward-looking, playful, and generally optimistic. It would not be an overstatement to suggest that romance is in the air. By saying as much I am not trying to dismiss the exciting possibilities that might be accomplished by ethnographers and designers working and learning with and from each other, nor do I want to cast a wet blanket on the excitement that can accompany making new friends. Ethnographers need enchantment as much anyone else, and I have certainly had a crush on design that I will return to at the end of this chapter. For me, the potential problem with ethnographers romancing design is not the vitality that such romances engender, but rather the tendency to idealize the object of affection, that is, the tendency to fixate on design's apparently positive characteristics while overlooking and downplaying less rosy aspects of design, as well as of the budding relationship. In short, in romancing design I worry that we might be obscuring some of its politics.

As my colleague Lilly Irani (2013, 2015) has helped elaborate, the rising status and power of design and design practices is intimately entwined with the rising power of terms such as “innovation,” “entrepreneurialism,” and “disruption,” as well as with the related feelings of awe that can accompany the ongoing proliferation of new media technologies in more and more facets of social life. Given these associations, it would be politically naive to embrace design without giving careful consideration to the political ideologies and programs of which design and designers are increasingly and often integrally a part. And yet it would also be a mistake, it seems to me, to dismiss the recent interests that some ethnographers have shown in design as just another instance of neoliberalism taking over the academy and the world. What is needed is not just recognition that design is political, but also a nuanced discussion about how design does and can do political work, in different situations, for and with differently located participants, including sometimes ethnographers.

Before jumping in, I want to be clear that the chapter does not offer a comprehensive or definitive account of design and politics. Given the brevity of the chapter, I do not address important questions about the power relations among and between designers and ethnographers—I do not address what some ethnographers might be getting from a partnership with design, nor what some designers might be getting from coupling with ethnography. Nor do I extensively address how design-ethnography can turn heads, win resources, and inspire respect in ways that neither could do as effectively on its own.

Rather, and in keeping with the analysis, the chapter takes a propositional stance that also attempts to remain committed to the situated character of all political practices, including practices of proposing. In that vein, I want to emphasize that the ideas put forth in this chapter are reworkings of patterns that have been relayed to me, first as someone who worked in the worlds of professional designers, then as someone who learned to become an academic ethnographer who, in part, studied professional designers trying to improve the world, and most recently as an Assistant Professor who sometimes teaches classes that experiment with doing design as politics and who has been in close correspondence with a couple of ethnographers who also care deeply about design and politics. On this last point I should note that almost everything that follows has emerged from ongoing conversations with two of my colleagues in the Department of Communication at UC San Diego: Lilly Irani and Fernando Domínguez Rubio. Both have addressed similar issues at greater length and with more eloquence than I do here. If these themes are of interest to you, then I heartily recommend consulting some of the ideas that have shaped my own.³

Prescribing

Perhaps the most thoroughly analyzed political possibility of design can be characterized as a process of *prescribing*. The field of science and technology studies, in particular, has investigated

how even the most mundane seeming designed artifacts and environments—from bridges (Winner 1980), to door-closers (Latour 1988), to phone books (Bowker and Star 1999)—can act in ways that enable, route, and generally micromanage the perceptions, actions, and interpretations of the other actors entangled in a given setting. As Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour (1992, 261) succinctly put it, prescription has to do with “what a device allows or forbids from the actors—humans and non-human—that it anticipates.” Designed objects and environments, from this perspective, do not just limit and enhance actors; rather, they help constitute them as the sorts of actors that they are in particular situated activities. It is from this proposition that Akrich and Latour, as well as many others, have famously argued that designed objects and environments have a moral, and hence political, character.

At one level, the observation that designed objects exert a prescriptive force is hardly surprising. People know, for example, that a barbed-wire fence discourages certain activities for both humans and non-humans just as they know that an all-you-can-eat buffet encourages others. For many designers, prescribing—or more positively inflected synonyms such as “affording”—are the *raison d'être* of design, and, indeed, designers and engineers tend to emphasize the prescriptive capacities of their designs as they attempt to promote and publicize them. What is more, perennially polarized public debates about the social implications of new technologies are in large part arguments over the presumed prescriptive forces that a new design exerts. And, if anything, both designers and those who engage in public debates about new technologies tend to overstate the presumed prescriptive capacities of design.

But the prescriptive capacities of design can also act in less noticed, and hence potentially more insidious, ways, and it is this insidiousness that critical analysts are keen to ferret out. Here, analysts tend to be concerned with how design, and the work of technoscience more generally, does political work that is not recognized as such. The concern in these cases is with the ways that designed objects and environments can be a mode of doing “politics by other means,” to borrow a phrase from Donna Haraway (1984). Of particular concern is the way that design and technoscience can be a way of doing anti-politics, that is, with the ways in which political problems and concerns are translated into seemingly apolitical technoscientific problems that designers and other experts can manage and solve, a process that the anthropologist Tania Murray Li (2007) has characterized as “rendering technical.”

Examples from the worlds of international development are especially helpful for illustrating how processes of rendering technical produce depoliticizing effects even when the prescriptions that designers inscribe in their interventions fail to work as planned. I did my PhD at an Information School, which, among other things, has become a fertile ground for the emergence of various fields that take researching and designing for “the other” as one of their professed areas of expertise. By attending such a program I became familiar with the emerging field of Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D), an effort to bring together technology designers, government officials, NGOs, and social scientists, including ethnographers, in an attempt to address perceived deficiencies and injustices in the global South. Through critical dialogs with graduate students who were trying to conduct ethnographic studies of and for ICT4D projects, as well as through my own involvement in projects that aimed to reinvent education for the digital age, I came to see how design could have deeply problematic depoliticizing effects even as a given intervention “failed” on its own terms. A political-economic problem, such as extreme poverty, was translated into a technical-informational problem—such as a lack of computers or Internet connectivity—that a designed intervention, like One Laptop Per Child or Facebook’s Internet.org initiative, could supposedly remediate. Not only did these

processes of rendering technical tend to depoliticize the sources of poverty, they often also reductively distorted the worlds that designers targeted for improvement. As such, when designers engaged in processes of rendering technical they tended to inscribe into artifacts and built environments prescriptions that did not fulfill designers' aspirations, but these "failed" interventions nevertheless produced effects that were very much political (cf. Ferguson 1994; Scott 1998; Li 2007; Sims 2017).

Design can also act in insidiously political ways in cases where an artifact or environment's prescriptive character is overlooked, forgotten, or treated as natural or normal. Once a designed artifact becomes integrated into webs of material practices—once it has been "black boxed," to use a term from science studies—its prescriptive character tends to disappear into the background of taken-for-granted experience, except in cases of crisis and breakdown. For Susan Leigh Star (1999), such "boringness" was precisely what made the study of designed infrastructures—from sewers to geographically distributed electronic laboratories—both interesting and politically important. It is in part because so many designed artifacts and infrastructures tend to fall into the background of everyday experience that design's prescriptive capacities can be an insidious way of doing "politics by other means."

Publicizing

Just as design can be a way of inscribing and concealing political prescriptions, so too can it help publicize issues, concerns, and actors that are typically excluded from the terrain of political debates and struggles. By using the term "publicizing" I mean to reference both recent invocations to use design as a means of "making things public" (Latour 2005), as well as the long history of design in the professions of public relations, advertising, and propaganda, the latter two of which are the worlds through which I learned to practice design. While these two senses of publicizing sit uneasily with one other, they also resonate in ways that suggest some caution be taken before celebrating design for its capacities to make things public. For the sake of this chapter, however, I will focus on the more optimistic version of design as a means of publicizing.

Latour's vision of design as "the cautious Prometheus" puts forth a mode of doing politics that does not just criticize modernizing philosophies and schemes but also aims to supplant them. Latour's invocation can be read as an extension of his influential salvo *Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?* (2004), which called into question the iconoclastic tendencies and political efficacy of social and cultural critique. For Latour, the urgency of the contemporary political and ecological situation requires critically inclined academics to not just diagnose what is wrong with other people's ideas and programs but also to go about attempting to change material conditions. Design, according to Latour, offers a humble and practical model for how to go about making social-material change in a way that is neither revolutionary nor modernizing; it suggests a way, Latour maintains, to "draw together" the conflictual and contradictory matters of concern that characterize any attempt to change material circumstances. Design can thus be a way of "making public" the complex human and non-human entanglements that modernist ideologies and political projects attempt to simplify and purify in part through the processes of rendering technical discussed in the last section.

A concrete example will help clarify how some ethnographers and designers have responded to Latour's invocation. In an article titled, *Technifying Public Space and Publicizing Infrastructures* (2013), my colleague Fernando Domínguez Rubio, an ethnographer, and Uriel Fogué, an architect, describe a design proposal that Fogué's architecture firm produced for the city council of Madrid. The firm proposed redesigning Plaza del General

Vara de Rey, a public square in Madrid, so that the energy and water infrastructures upon which city inhabitants depend would be transformed from taken-for-granted “matters of fact” into matters of public concern. Among other things, the proposal envisioned installing a collection of “hybrid urban trees” that would combine shade-giving solar panels with recreational artifacts such as swings. The energy captured and transformed by these solar panels would, in turn, help power the treatment and circulation of rainwater collected to irrigate the plaza’s vegetation, and excess power would be sold back to the city’s power grid in order to pay for the cost of redeveloping and maintaining the square. For Domínguez Rubio and Fogué, such an intervention would not only transform “a hitherto passive public space” into “an active urban power plant fully integrated into the infrastructural network of the city” (Domínguez Rubio and Fogué 2013, 1044). It would also transform the city’s infrastructure, which is typically concealed from the public except in cases of breakdown, from a matter of fact into a matter of concern.

The architectural firm’s plans for the plaza represent just one attempt to use design to make things, in this case infrastructures and ecological processes, public, and, in so doing, to transform seemingly settled matters of fact into matters of concern, the latter of which could be subject to public debates and more democratic political struggles. Like Latour, Domínguez Rubio and Fogué’s example also focuses on politicizing the entanglement of sociotechnical systems and ecological processes. For readers who are sympathetic to these issues, including myself, these examples illustrate an optimistic case of how design can be used as a mode of doing politics by way of publicizing.

Proposing

A third, and related, political process in which design can play a role is that of *proposing*. Here, the challenge for the designer is not the modernist imperative to prescribe solutions, but rather a more modest attempt to put forth possible, but not necessarily probable, futures. Politically, the designer is trying to use design as a means for sparking reflection and debate about the sort of futures people do and do not want. Using design as a way to help imagine possible collective futures can in part be seen as an attempt to break out of the fatalisms, realisms, and cynicisms that often characterize contemporary politics, and especially the difficulty of imagining an alternative to neoliberalism (cf. Fisher 2009; Wright 2010). Proposing is similar to prescribing in that the designer is positioned as an expert who articulates a changed material reality, but proposals stop short of attempting to answer the modernist question “what is to be done?” and instead respond to the more modest question “what might be?” Proposing is also related to publicizing in that the designer aims to share resources for imagining futures, but proposing does not aim to simply transform matters of fact into matters of concern; rather, the designer attempts to catalyze imaginings of where those entanglements might lead, as well as how they might be changed.

While the design-as-proposing stance has a long history among designers, and particularly architects, it has recently gained momentum as a way of doing politics in part thanks to the “speculative design” movement, as exemplified by the works of designer-scholars such as Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (2013). An example speculative design project that Dunne and Raby produced with their students, titled “United Micro Kingdoms,” can help illustrate the political possibilities of design as proposing.⁴ The United Micro Kingdoms project imagines a not-too-distant future in which the United Kingdom has fractured into four “micro kingdoms,” each of which pursues a different idealized version of political-economic and sociotechnical organization. To catalyze reflection, imagination, and discussion about the sorts

of futures people do and do not want, the designers imagined, designed, and built models of the dominant modes of transport that would be used in each of these fictional worlds. Because designed artifacts inscribe the moral characteristics of the worlds of which they are a part, the designers hoped that speculative models of future modes of transport could catalyze reflection and discussion about the political, economic, social, natural, and technological entanglements that help constitute the worlds we inhabit and are helping to make. For example, for a speculative micro kingdom organized predominantly by market forces, digital surveillance, and technocratic efficiency, the designers built models of self-driving electric cars that rely on tracking technologies to optimize use of “public” roadways. In this imagined world, the state would lease public roads to private companies that, in turn, would rent consumer-citizens temporary access to public road-space through their fleets of self-driving vehicles. If a consumer wanted to take up more road-space-time, they could pay more to rent a self-driving vehicle with a larger spatial footprint, much like today’s price gradations for seat-space on budget airlines. In such a world, transport technologies would be instrumental appliances governed by the technification of an economic rationality, all of which would be legitimated under the guise of consumer choice.

By designing a fictional vehicle tailored for this dystopian future world, Dunne and Raby aimed to *publicize* how moral *prescriptions* and modes of social organization are materially inscribed into our technologies and infrastructures; they did so in an attempt to catalyze debate about how many people live now as well as how people want to live in the future. In doing so, they attempted to use design as a way of doing politics that tries to evade the trappings of, on the one hand, the utopianism that characterizes so many tech-solutionist projects, as well as, and on the other hand, the fatalism of so many “realist” accounts.

Design Within (Whose) Reach?

Design’s capacities for doing politics are no doubt part of what makes design alluring to many contemporary ethnographers. In my own case, I have studied the problematic political consequences of well-intended design initiatives while also remaining involved with designers so as to experiment with different ways of doing politically engaged work. I hope to keep up this exploration and I am glad to see that many other ethnographers are also experimenting along similar lines.

Yet I also worry that there is something politically important but often missing in many of the more enthusiastic calls for design-ethnography pairings. In particular, in romancing design I worry that some ethnographers risk overlooking the fact that design-ethnography couplings are often pairings of professional elites with overlapping but also different bases of spatialized privilege. Another way of putting this last point is that both design and ethnographic modes of scholarly production are always located somewhere, and these somewheres are both structured by and structuring of a spatialized, hierarchical, and often quasi-Tayloristic global division of paid and unpaid labor.⁵ While ethnographers and designers might criticize these arrangements, and particularly the forces of bureaucratization, many have also done comparatively well living off these material and cultural divisions, and, as such, their politics of change might do more to preserve and extend, rather than to transgress and uproot, these inherited divisions.

My own trajectory through these intersecting worlds will help illustrate this last point. My romance with design began not long after I graduated college when I, like many other graduates of selective colleges on the east coast of the United States, moved to New York City to begin my career. When I arrived in New York I did not know much about the worlds of professional

designers, nor did I have much interest in, nor an opinion about, what constituted good and bad design. And yet within two years of moving to New York I had moved to design-conscious Brooklyn, I was spending much of my free time reading design books, learning design software, taking design classes, and visiting exhibitions at places like MoMA to learn about canonically revered designers such as Mies van der Rohe. Within a few years I had learned to identify and covet “well designed” items, including furniture that I could not afford from farcically named stores like “Design Within Reach.”

What changed?

For one, my first job after college was in the rapidly growing professional field known nowadays as interaction or experience design. In this job I worked with numerous young professionals who had been trained at the Rhode Island School of Design, a prestigious design school in the United States. It was largely through my relationship with these budding professional designers that I came to learn about and appreciate the practices and products of their professional world. Like many others who have developed a crush on design, I found these designers’ professional practices and lifestyles seductive. They seemed creative, culturally and technically sophisticated, and generally hip. It was pleasurable to playfully experiment, to think and act in imaginative ways, to make stuff with others, and to think that we were inventing the future. What we were actually doing was making marketing devices for organizations that could afford to pay us, but I was young and naive and for many years I was hooked on design.

Quite a few years, and a PhD, later, it is now somewhat embarrassingly obvious to me that my romance with design—and later, but hopefully to a lesser extent, with ethnography—was tied to my not-so-reflexive aspirations to belong to an elite and seemingly cosmopolitan professional class faction. I learned how to be more like a designer as I was trying to figure out what sort of professional adult person I could become, first in New York City and later in the San Francisco Bay Area where I moved for graduate school. Knowledge about, appreciation for, and being skillful at design were, and remain, markers of a cosmopolitan sophistication in many of the New York City and Bay Area circles in which I traveled, and they remain esteemed knowledges and practices in many of the parts of academia that I now traverse.

For me, the important political question raised by these experiences is not whether ethnographers should try to build alliances with other professional elites—in many ways they must—but rather on how they do so, with whom else, and with what consequences for what and whom? If thinking and making practices are like a game of cat’s cradle, as Donna Haraway (2013) suggests, then it is worth remembering that when we do design and ethnography, and hence politics, we are always doing so with partners that are within our reach.

Notes

- 1 While echoing the sentiment of Marx’s final thesis on Feuerbach, most contemporary ethnographers who advocate for design as a mode of doing material politics imagine a distinctively non-revolutionary mode of political change. Latour (2008, 2) is explicit on this point.
- 2 I thank my colleague Fernando Domínguez Rubio for first bringing to my attention the prescribing versus proposing distinction. For Domínguez Rubio, the political capacities of design can be characterized as “enfolding” and “unfolding” what counts as political. The former loosely corresponds to my discussion of prescribing whereas his notion of “unfolding” includes what I am characterizing separately as publicizing and proposing. I am using the terms prescribing, publicizing, and proposing—rather than enfolding and unfolding—in an attempt to emphasize that these are rather ordinary, and often pedestrian, processes in social life. By using these more colloquial terms I also wish to draw attention to how some recent design enthusiasts have tended to overlook the long history of design in not-so-inspiring activities such as marketing, advertising, and public relations. For Domínguez Rubio’s discussion of “enfolding” and “unfolding” see (Domínguez Rubio and Fogué 2015).

- 3 See in particular Domínguez Rubio and Fogué (2013, 2015), and Irani (2013, 2015).
- 4 For an online version of this exhibition, see Dunne and Raby (2015).
- 5 Lucy Suchman, an ethnographer who spent much of her career working inside the worlds of professional technology designers, has articulated a similar position with her call for a politics of design and scholarship as one of “located accountability” (Suchman 2002).

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