Co-Design and the public realm

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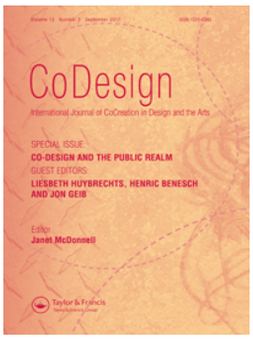

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EDITORIAL

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Co-Design and the public realm

Co-Design's engagement with the public realm is rooted in an activist tradition aspiring to increase democratic participation of diverse societal groups in design activities related to public space, services, systems or policy. This is partly due to its historical relationship with the Scandinavian tradition of Participatory Design (PD) which developed in the 1970s and shared concerns and values with labour unions in emancipating workers at the workplace (Bannon and Ehn 2012, 39; Lenskjold, Olander, and Halse 2015). However, since the rise of the Post-Fordist era, Co-Design's engagement has changed due to the influence of increasing globalisation, flexibility, rapid technological developments, increasingly specialised and competitive markets and the associated transformation of social conditions (Boudry et al. 2003, 43). Many traditional aspects of the public domain—such as mobility or communication infrastructure—shifted to the private domain, resulting in progressively more complex relations with governance and regulation (Christopherson 1994; Davis 1990; Graham and Marvin 1994; Harvey 1994). In short, in a Post-Fordist context, designing takes place across previously delineated and contrasting spheres (or economic sectors, city borders, socio-political collectives and discourses), such as public/private, work/leisure, local/global—the boundaries between which become increasingly blurred and eradicated.

In *Design for The Real World* (1971), Papanek saw the pursuit of social change and engagement with the market as incompatible activities. Post-Fordism has erased prior distinctions to such a degree that Co-Design, as a method of bringing together a wide range of actors to identify and develop possible futures, is today being applied in disparate fields—to improve labour relations, to increase consumption and in political activism, for instance. In this mixed context it is not unusual that Co-Design can act as a conduit for market forces and other forms of private interest. This has again intensified the discourse within Co-Design on the political and the public realm—though in different ways than in the 1970s—and prompted us to raise the following questions, which are addressed in this special issue:

- What are the consequences, tensions and challenges of Co-Design engaging with the public realm when that realm is increasingly entangled with private forces?
- What concepts, frameworks, tools and methods are used and what values are pursued to answer these challenges?
- In an era of growing social, ecological and economic injustice, is the answer found in the mobilisation of all possible forces, including design, in order to challenge the marketisation of the political?
- Or, on the contrary, is the answer to pull back and rethink Co-Design in this era of blurred boundaries?
- Additionally, are divisions between public and private productive; or, are there other alternatives?

We invited authors to submit research papers in relation to one or more of the above questions. In our own introductory article, we argue that there has been a tendency within PD and Co-Design to downplay and/or ignore the meso- and macro-level institutional frameworks which inform their micro-level activities on the ground, a tendency that can contribute to de-politicisation

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and instrumentalisation. We introduce the term *institutioning* in order to re-politicise PD and Co-Design through a re-engagement with institutions and institutional frameworks which enables us to be more critically attentive and responsive in relation to our contexts of operation and thus to the potential for effecting political change.

The discussion on dealing with Co-Design's de-politisation and instrumentalisation runs as an undercurrent through many of the articles in this special issue. Markussen emphasises the importance of questioning the nature and impact of design processes so as to be able to deal critically with their instrumentalisation in today's public realm. In particular, he discusses that although the terms social design, social innovation and social entrepreneurship differ in aim, modus operandi, locus of design and innovation and the scale of effects, they are often used interchangeably. He then proposes conceptual tools for making fine-grained delineations of social design in theory and in practice. Devos, Kaethler and De Blust similarly aim to enable PD and Co-Design researchers and practitioners to be not only more critical in relation to their context of operation, but also more reflexive about their own practice. They advance the concept of 'strategic ambiguity' as a framework for negotiating between the critical potential of PD and its instrumentalisation, or 'between access, trust, and criticality'. Seravalli, Agger Eriksen and Hillgren discuss commoning and infrastructuring as modalities in which PD researchers can engage with communities and institutional organisations, allowing public sector officials—not only PD researchers and practitioners—to build a more critical and reflexive practice. Parker and Schmidt demonstrate how commoning may be constructively applied in a PD context, in particular calling attention to the importance of 'network and subtractive effects of shared resources and acknowledging interrelations with the public sector'. Finally, prototyping of policy and *policy frames*, as outlined by Kimbell and Bailey, describes a field of operations equally important to PD and Co-Design if they are to have the ambition to move beyond the status quo.

In summary, this special issue explores challenges faced by PD and Co-Design researchers operating in the blurred but heterogeneous landscape of today's public realm. While the articles note the lost opportunities of withdrawing from this complexity and from institutions into the micro-political scale, they, more importantly, propose approaches and potential courses of action for engaging more actively and critically with the institutions and the institutional frames which in large part set the agenda for our shared public realm.

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