Why designers are such good people
- a few reflections on the self-image of a profession.

Welcome to NERD7 - with this year's somewhat enigmatic header "7th heaven".

Let me share with you some – maybe controversial – reflections *on why designers feel so vehemently responsible and competent for the well-being of society*. Or, more bluntly: **why designers are such good people**.

I have been asking myself this question for quite some time, especially since I directed the Master "Transformation Design" at HBK Braunschweig. The ambitious claim formed the implicit basis of the program. So, I explicitly refer the critique to myself as well.

Design has not participated in the functional differentiation of modern societies. It preserves the self-image as a "holistic", cross-sectional activity that deals with virtually "everything" that *concerns* us: an almost unlimited *scope* of subject areas. Design has not developed explicit programs and success codes – like other subsystems such as science, economics, law or politics. In Bruno Latour´s words: "We have never been modern"[1].

Rather, some substitute "meta code" of **good/bad** seems to have emerged, with the sometimes embarrassingly naive claim to be the only authority addressing "true" human needs. So, we reason **morally**, and in doing so, we often produce cute pony farm idylls[2].

Niklas Luhmann describes morality as a medium of communication that operates by the distinction of respect/disrespect. It stabilizes social expectations and reduces complexity but also has excluding and escalating effects. So, morality is risky; it can hinder understanding where it is needed.

Btw: To understand the specifics of design, I have sometimes compared it to other disciplines/professions that deal with human well-being, especially medicine. Think of "médecins sans frontières". They have a clear success code and a program of action and don't require an elaborate moral superstructure.

"We" consider ourselves somehow "progressive", left-liberal, of course "green", without making this explicit, let alone reflecting it too much. Due to lack of arguments, we often resort to strong normative statements, called "manifestos", about the self-image, *stance* and objectives of the discipline / profession. Such as the Kyoto Design Declaration 2008 and, most recently, the Shanghai Manifesto 2024.

Design´s competence for "everything" is usually applied to the positive side of "everything", the Platonic Trinity of *the true, the beautiful, and the good*. That's honorable, but who is responsible for the other 90%, for *the false, the ugly, and the evil*? Who are these willing executors who design the stuff for the insatiable consumers and the tricky populist propaganda, and who promote the social media pathologies? Are they among us, but don´t show up? No idea.

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[1] Latour, Bruno (1998) Wir sind nie modern gewesen. Versuch einer symmetrischen Anthropologie. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer

[2] Even the development of a collection of T-shirts with "progressive" political slogans is sometimes sold as political design and design research (the author´s experience from a recent DRS peer-review process).

Activism: Design as political actor / doing politics?

Let´s stay on the "good" side of the distinction. The hubris is forgivable, yet it is worrying that power relations and other uncomfortable constraints are deliberately overlooked. In their longing for harmony, designers often ignore the nature of human psyche and of social systems with all their stupidity, selfishness and hegemonial struggles. They love the idea that humans are basically good. Of course, some are good, and some bad and most are mean – in both meanings of the term. And societies are complex and full of paradox and conflict.

We are approaching the field of **politics**. I adopt Niklas Luhmann's sober, analytical, non-normative description of politics as a formalized mechanism of processing socially relevant decisions (based on the binary code power/no power). And I ask: "How political can / should design be and is permitted to be?"

The programmatic promise in the above-mentioned Transformation Design Master was (still is) to provide "skills to *reflect, initiate,* and *design* change processes". To *initiate* is perhaps the most delicate part, which comes closest to the misunderstanding of design doing politics.

Who is the client? And who am I?

Two aspects, mentioned before, are essential[3]: (1) The *scope* or boundary judgement: How to define the design field (that which can be manipulated) in contrast to the context (that which must be taken as it is)? (2) The *stance* or value orientation: how to formulate a well-founded, non-trivial ethical attitude and a concrete design goal?

This leads to Herbert Simon´s question "Who is the client?" He argues[4]: "It may seem obvious that all ambiguities should be resolved by identifying the client with the whole society. That would be a clear-cut solution in a world without conflict of interest or uncertainty in professional judgement. ... The members of an organization or a society for whom plans are made are not passive instruments but are themselves designers who are seeking to use the system to further their own goals."

One may object that in our "progressive" stance we avoid these problems because we don´t design *for* but *with* people. This is what Valerie Brown[5] elaborates in her reflections on the different relational qualities between designers/researchers and the client community. She opens a continuum between the poles of the distant Cartesian *observer / expert designer* and the *inquiring community* (plus 4 shades of grey in-between):

The one extreme: Design as professional contractor for policy advice, developing options, facilitating decision-making processes for others, but not deciding. Stances mostly remain implicit; thus, value conflicts are likely to occur ("Can I still take responsibility for this dubious assignment?").

The other extreme: Designer and client merge into one, acting as political subjects. Values are explicit, but role conflicts are likely to occur ("Who am I? A professional designer or a stakeholder with vested interests?") New role models emerge: the citizen designer / the designing citizen, the vanishing of expert cultures shows up: John Dewey´s ideal of "epistemic democracy", or John Chris Jones´ "creative democracy". Sounds good, but is this still entirely desirable? Democracy can be misused to deny scientific facts. Communities can be very questionable in their goals. In some intellectual communities, it is hip to be right-wing, see the

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[3] Findeli, Alain (2010) "Searching for design reseach questions: Some conceptual clarifications". In: Chow, R.; Jonas, W.; Joost, G. (Eds.) *Questions, Hypotheses & Conjectures*. Xlibris Corp.
[4] In Chapter 6 in *The Sciences of the Artificial,* „Social Planning: Designing the Evolving Artifact".
[5] Brown, Valerie A.: "Collective inquiry and its wicked problems." In: Dies. / John A. Harris / Jacqueline Y. Russell (eds.): *Tackling wicked problems through the transdisciplinary imagination.* London 2010, 61-83.

"Dimes Square"[6] scene in New York City. Or the new, chic-sounding approach of "Militant Design Research"[7]. I am afraid to see this under authoritarian premises.

Design is political but does not make politics!

So what? Back to Simon´s soothing serenity: "One desideratum would be a world offering as many alternatives as possible to future decision makers, avoiding irreversible commitments that they cannot undo. [...] One can envisage a future [...] in which our main interest in both science and design will lie in what they teach us about the world and not in what they allow us to do to the world. Design like science is a tool for understanding as well as for acting."

I think it is crucial to maintain the balance between reflecting and acting, design research and activism. We should carefully complement and not mix the two. The line between academic credibility (which we still strive for?) and banal moral-ideological activism / influencerism is quite thin. It resembles a permanent tightrope walk.

Maybe controversial, but: Morality remains an individual issue. Moral *communities* are in danger of becoming authoritarian. Moral judgement as design principle reduces / destroys complexity on the "problem" side and limits the variety of options (contingency) on the "solution" side.

Niklas Luhmann[8]: "It is perhaps the most urgent task of ethics to warn against morality".

Heinz von Foerster (1993) clarified this striking statement[9]: „I want to let language and action float on an underground river of ethics and ensure that neither of them sinks, so that ethics does not have an explicit voice and language does not degenerate into moral preaching."

So, design´s task, in my idiosyncratic view, is to develop options / increase the variety of choices, to cultivate the role as scout, agent provocateur, jester, ... *and* mundane service provider, always asking: **Who is the client? And who am I? And does this fit?** We don´t need boastful manifestos that propagate a universal morality, but reflective, informed, responsible – also controversial – contributions that help people address their problems.

Design is (necessarily) political but should not try to make politics!

So, welcome again to NERD 7th Heaven – let´s embrace the optimistic tone of the title, in Aristotle´s sense, who described the 7th celestial sphere as a divine and perfect space…

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[6] Dimes Square refers to a small neighbourhood in Manhattan, which has become a metonym for a number of associated reactionary movements centred in the area
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dimes_Square
[7] See Bibiana Serpa: https://www.revistadisena.uc.cl/index.php/Disena/article/view/53741
[8] Reference missing.
[9] German quote in Foerster, Heinz von (1993) *KybernEthik,* Berlin: Merve Verlag, p. xx: „Ich möchte Sprache und Handeln auf einem unterirdischen Fluß der Ethik schwimmen lassen und darauf achten, dass keines der beiden untergeht, so dass Ethik nicht explizit zu Wort kommt und Sprache nicht zur Moralpredigt degeneriert."