Negotiating the Value of Participation

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Abstract

PartE is a collaborative research platform which aims to support people to examine and share their experiences of participating in design for social change. The development of PartE is motivated by a recognition that social change – both intentional and unintentional – is a negotiated activity between multiple interacting social actors. As different people view, act and evaluate the world around them in what Schon calls seeing-moving-seeing, conflicts between perceptions arise. Negotiation is the iterative process of overcoming these conflicts and the attempt to move towards alignment across these independent design decisions. PartE conversations reveal that designers are perceived as facilitators and translators of these negotiations rather than as co-negotiators of social change. This short paper proposes that this differentiation of the role of designers versus non-designers is problematic for Participatory Design where all actors must consider themselves as a designer in order to genuinely participate in design negotiations leading to social change. Additionally by taking on the role of facilitator or translator of social change, designers are positioned outside of the everyday design decisions leading to social change – or the decisions of a growing 'design society'. The value of these roles, although somewhat protected by their externality, are unable to be renegotiated by the 'design society', and are therefore unable to participate in it. To participate designers must be willing to negotiate rather than impose their changing role. The author therefore invites the reader 'to PartE' in support of a negotiation of the value of participation in design for social change.

An Introduction to PartE

PartE is a collaborative research platform which aims to support people to examine and share their experiences of participating in design for social change. The platform hangs from an evolving framework consisting of three dimensions which aim to capture broadly **why** people participate in social change initiatives, **how** people participate in social change initiatives and **what** people contribute when they participate (Gerrard and Sosa, 2014). PartE was developed by Opportunity Lab, an interdisciplinary design lab at the Singapore University of Technology and Design seeking to enhance to design role people play in social change.

Although seemingly simple, the framework is designed to reveal the implicit assumptions and expectations that people hold about participation. The ultimate goal of PartE is to be a community research platform which supports reflection on the realities of participation in design by a multitude of stakeholders and as a way to explore and test alternative practices which overcome some of the challenges that arise due to conflicts and contradictions between multiple expectations of participation.

The development of PartE is motivated and guided by a recognition that social change – both intentional and unintentional – is a negotiated activity between multiple interacting social actors (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006). Social change can never be the planned vision of a single designer and is ultimately an unplanned compilation of various independently generated intentional decisions made by many different actors. Each of these decisions is made in relation to the history and context of the individual making them. It is these histories and contexts which must be critiqued and negotiated for social change to occur.

Schon's 'design move' as negotiation

The negotiation of social change relates to Schon's idea of 'design moves' (Schön, 1983; Schön & Wiggins, 1992) where actors make conscious design decisions in relation to the world around them. Latour writes extensively on the idea that design is a negotiated process of social change between the individual, the social context and the designed artefact (Highmore, 2008; Latour, 2005). In this paper we follow Latour's understanding of design as a negotiation between the autonomous 'design moves' recognised by Schon. As different actors view, act and evaluate the world around them in what Schon calls seeing-moving-seeing, conflicts inevitably arise between these autonomous moves. Negotiation is the iterative process of overcoming these conflicts and the attempt to move towards alignment across these independent design decisions. For these negotiations to occur all actors must consider themselves to be co-negotiators in a common process of social change.

Designer's as Non-Negotiators

Conversations – guided by PartE – however have revealed that designers frequently consider themselves to be the visionaries of social change rather than as negotiators in social change. These perceptions become apparent when designers describe the barriers to participation in design as a consequence of "the mind-set of most people not being open to change" which they often ascribe to the "political and social barriers…which exist within the system".

PD responds to this apparent aversion to change by inviting social actors to participate in a design process concerned with creating social change. In these types of projects, designers often perceive their role as one of facilitator of a 'design process' – orchestrating the negotiation of social change between various actors rather than joining the negotiation of social change as participant. Statements from PartE such as "participation could work if people were more informed about collaboration" and "participants generally use accepted or adapted (design) processes while designers evolve (these) processes" support this view.

This role of facilitator in PD however is often confused or combined with the role of translator – where designers take on the responsibility of packaging histories and contexts into a spectrum of outputs from policy recommendations to new products and services which aim to implicitly or explicitly facilitate dialogue between other social actors. In effect they take on the responsibility of Schon's seeing-moving-seeing. Statements from our PartE conversations which highlight this perception include "in addition to resources and knowledge – the most important contributions made by participants – a designer needs to have awareness, appreciation and understanding" and "community see themselves as mainly a source of data while designers are concerned with understanding the context rather than managing resources".

This translation role requires reflection and analysis – an activity which cannot be practiced without situating the 'seeing' within the designer's personal understanding of the world – generated like other social actors through their direct participation in it. Unlike other social actors however, designers are in a position within society to impose their understanding of the 'other' by analysing, packaging and presenting it back to society through their role as translator.

Both perceptions – that of designer as facilitator and designer as translator – differentiate designers from other social change actors and positions them firmly outside of the negotiation processes which lead to social change.

However, by positioning the role of designers outside of the everyday negotiations of social change the term 'designer' becomes protected from use by other social change actors – who cannot by definition sit outside 'society'. These societal actors are therefore excluded from participating in social change as a designer and are perceived rather as a 'user' of a design process. This differentiation has not only been constructed by the formal design discipline but is firmly and repeatedly articulated during PartE conversations with PD participants (rather than PD designers) who frequently use statements such as "I am not a designer but…" and "as a non-designer I…"

This short paper proposes that these determined differentiations are problematic for PD where all actors must consider themselves as a designer in order to genuinely participate in design negotiations which lead to social change.

Designers Outside a Negotiating 'Design society'

Professionals within the not-for-profit and development sector are commonly heard stating that 'their work will be done when they no longer have a job' – referring to the idea that if everyone in society has the capacity to negotiate change within their world, the role of the development professional - as advocate and implementer of social change - will no longer be needed.

The role of the development professional has traditionally been one of translator and facilitator of social change for marginalised communities whose needs are not met by existing institutional structures. As designers begin to perceive themselves as facilitators and translators of social change it is still unclear whether they have adopted this same intention. An intention of creating, as Cross describes it, a society where "everyone can begin to perceive the common creative activity in which they are engaged, and can begin to share their experiences of the creative, professional design process" (Cross, 2001:53).

Cross' optimistic idea of a 'design society' resonates with Latour's more political articulation of design as a negotiation between people, place and things. Schon scales these concepts to the independent choices made by individuals which he describes as 'design moves' while Boltanski and Thevenot consider the interconnected nature of these decisions based on the values ascribed to them according to different orders of worth. These values guide the negotiation of social change arising from design and are themselves negotiated through the process of design. By positioning themselves as facilitator or translator of these negotiations – and thereby as external to them – designers find themselves in the peculiar position of outside the 'design society' and therefore unable to renegotiate their value in it.

Negotiating Value with Non-Negotiators

PartE is attempting to support a conversation about how different social actors engage with the negotiations of an emerging 'design society'. These conversations are fundamentally a negotiation of the value that different actors place on the participation of various individuals in decision making. Preliminary PartE conversations however have revealed a perception that designers participate not as negotiators in social change but as translators or facilitators of social change. In essence, the position of designers exists outside of the negotiations of social change, thereby protecting the traditions and values of design as a profession from the natural negotiations of change. In other words designers are perceived as non-negotiators - a position which fundamentally challenges the goals of PartE which seeks negotiation among all actors of social change, including designers.

To participate in a 'design society' designers must be willing to negotiate rather than impose their new role. PartE attempts to provide an avenue for this negotiation and in so doing must develop frameworks and formats which help bridge the gap between the 'outsider'

designer with the 'insider' designer. To achieve this type of negotiation requires an active and open community which fosters a negotiation about the values of participation across multiple histories and contexts. This paper therefore invites the reader – in whatever role they perceive themselves – to 'to PartE' in support of an inclusive 'design society' in which everyone can celebrate and realise their participation in creating social change.

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