Is design political? - By Jennie Winhall

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The design of politics

In 2001, design and politics hit the news big time when it was revealed that Florida's badly designed butterfly ballot could have cost Al Gore the U.S. presidency. It is perhaps the most widely quoted example of the political impact

of design. Yet pose the question, "Is design political?" to the design industry and you'll get back a big, resounding, "no."

I suspect this is because politics is commonly thought of as the activities of political organizations--from which the majority of designers (if not majority of people) feel disassociated. But there is a missed opportunity here: at base, politics is about values, and design is nothing if not a means of embodying values.

My policy colleagues say they went into politics because they wanted to challenge the status quo and make things better for ordinary people. That's certainly why I went into design. So maybe design is more political than you think.

If you bought a white wrist-band during the Make Poverty History campaign, you bought into the idea that design can be a political activity. The most overt use of design can be found in the symbols and touchpoints of formal politics, political organizations and national identity of course--in the logo of the Nazi party, British red telephone boxes, AIDS ribbons and white rubber wrist-bands--and these usages are about rallying people behind a political message. (After the collapse of Yugoslavia, Slovenia carefully designed its banknotes and army uniforms to signal a clear difference from the old regime and to signal its position as a western ally.1) This is the branding of Politics with a capital P, and political organizations rival the corporate world in their sophisticated use of it.

Groups like Adbusters use design to subvert these same messages. Agitprop, critical design, design activism--these are all ways of using the power of design to lobby and make social comment. What interests me more is not design's power as propaganda, but the power we have as designers in shaping the society in which we live.

Design is political because it has consequences, and sometimes serious ones. The power of designers is that we can design things to have different consequences. The Butterfly Ballot, of course, was not consciously designed to have the impact

it did, but it points to an inescapable question: Are designers responsible for the consequences of their designs?

Embodying ideology

Monuments to political (and corporate!) ideologies are all around us in the design of buildings, goods and services. A few years ago, a team of architects, policy makers and educationalists from the Do Tank looked at redesigning prisons. Prisons are a powerful example of the way design reinforces and makes manifest political ideology. In the 19th century, the dominant ideology in criminal justice was of power through surveillance, control, punishment of the psyche and awe of the state. Architects then designed their prisons to oppress and remove any sense of autonomy or personal identity. The most extreme of these designs is the panopticon, a circular format with a central watch tower which allows an observer to observe all prisoners without the prisoners being able to tell if they are being observed or not: the architectural equivalent of Big Brother. These designs punished indeed, but did nothing to rehabilitate their subjects. In fact, surviving examples of panopticons are known to create psychological trauma in their prisoners.

Prisons today are still built along the same model, despite the fact that ideologies have changed. The role of prisons now is to promote education and social skills to rehabilitate offenders and cut recidivism rates--an ideology impossible to realize in the old prison buildings, where, for the record, it costs the same to keep a prisoner secure as it does to educate a student at Eton, the famous private school. 80% is spent on security and only 20% on programs for the prisoners. New ideology, the Do Tank realized, needs new design, so they created a prison design that reverses that spending ratio and places the emphasis on rehabilitation. The design of the new prison breaks the building into 'Houses' of groups of prisoners, with cells designed to support learning through a networked keyboard and screen and to offer certain choices, for example the choice to buddy with a neighbouring cell, as an antidote to institutionalization. The

'Houses' are more efficient for security (meaning 80% of current spending can go on education) and more efficient for rehabilitation as prisoners learn the life skills required to run and manage their 'House'.2

Fenix Knowledge Centre ©A Brunberg/B Ericsson/J Pattison/Fenix Kunskapcentrum

Same goes for the design of schools. In the UK secondary schools were built in the 1950s on a comprehensive ideology that promoted equality, but also a Fordist, one-size-fits-all approach to learning. Pupils sat in rows in front of the teacher who dictated lessons from the blackboard. 50 years later this scene has not changed, despite the huge changes taking place in the modern workplace, such as an emphasis on IT and teamwork. Now that government has a new ideology (based on creativity and diversity of learning styles) and a new curriculum, it has embarked on a massive program designing and building new

schools. These new schools are just as attractive as the shopping malls where kids typically truant, and designed with flexible spaces for a mixture of group and individual work, desk-based work and role play, and opportunities for students to learn independently. The UK Design Council has worked with schools across the country to redesign their learning environments, creating new types of furniture and flexible learning spaces that support creative learning.

What better way to make the public--and teachers--see the radical changes being made to something as intangible as the philosophy of learning than to design new schools? New ideology, new design.

There has been a shift in conventional politics; a realization that top-down policies no longer work and that public services in particular must be redesigned around the user. Conventional policy makers are not readily equipped to do this. Designers are.

More power to...whom?

We think of politics as power wielded by those in the upper echelons of government, but it is instructive to note that French philosopher Michel Foucault describes power as distributed and ubiquitous--embedded in our daily lives. The spaces we inhabit, the tools we use and the systems we interact with are all mediated by design, and so design, then, operates as part of that power. It is, whether we like it or not, being used to shape society--but by whom?

Let's look at the relationship between design and health, for example. Type 2 diabetes is one of those chronic diseases that are largely caused by poor diet and lack of exercise. Morgan Spurlock's film Supersize Me talks about a "toxic environment" where the world around us is designed to make us less healthy. And it's clear that design is on the side of the FMCG companies, the car manufacturers, the convenience industry.

Unhealthy food is more convenient, and "designed" to be more appealing. Driving rather than walking has become an automatic choice. If your high street is full of convenience stores selling convenience food, if neighborhoods, with poor lighting and cracked pavements are no longer designed for walking, if fresh fruit and vegetables take twice as long to buy and prepare, if food labeling is confusing and cycle lanes non-existent...then how easy is it for you to change your lifestyle, take more exercise and stick to a healthy diet?

Design is a very powerful tool. It elevates the likelihood of certain kinds of choices and shapes certain kinds of behaviours. Most designers balk at the idea that design is a form of social engineering, but Hilary Cottam, director of RED at the UK Design Council, maintains that "if you don't look at what any design is governing, then you are being governed by it." She continues: "The question for us is how do we find out what the effects of design are and make sure we're using those for social justice." So in our diabetes example, we can reasonably ask, How might things be different if the power of design was deployed to keep us healthy and fit?

As Charles Leadbeater puts it: "Design used to be done by specialists for users. From now on, in a growing number of fields, design will be done with users and by them." In this context the designer is becoming the facilitator, the enabler, rather than the dictator of what people themselves want to do.

First things first

Political power can be broken down into three components: decision-making, agenda setting and shaping preferences. The First things First manifesto, re-released in 2000, calls for us to be conscious of our role in preference shaping:

"Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-

consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse."3

Whether you think this discourse is harmful depends on your values, I suppose, but that's politics. Some designers will argue that we design according to the preferences of our target market; British academic Steven Lukes, who posited the theory of preference-shaping would say that leaders do not merely respond to the preferences of constituents--leaders also shape preferences.4 (Industrial designers might find themselves using design to reinforce the "maleness" of power tools, for example.) As design educator Katherine McCoy says, "Design is not a neutral value-free process." ' She contends that corporate work of even the most innocuous content is never devoid of political bias.5

Crucially, good user-centred designers look at a problem from the point of view of the user, not the priorities of the system, institution or organisation. You could say that user-centred design is a political standpoint in itself. Designers observe people in context to understand the complex experiences, needs and wishes of individuals, and are able to represent and champion those needs throughout the design process.

Consequences and responsibility

Recently, we filmed a day in the life of a mum and two kids as part of a piece of work redesigning public transport. She navigated confusing signage, buses that were impossible to board with a push-chair, endless flights of steps and over-technical ticket machine interfaces. It all gave a clear message to her: you're not wanted here. Politically speaking, design can exclude or include all manner of people in all manner of ways throughout society.

Design is political because it has consequences, and sometimes serious ones. The power of designers is that we can design things to have *different* consequences. The Butterfly Ballot, of course, was not consciously designed to have the impact it did, but it points to an inescapable question: Are designers responsible for the consequences of their designs?

Most debates on sustainable design revolve around this question. When asked, many designers say that their job is to do what the client wants. But as Rick Poynor points out, this is an abnegation of responsibility. "The decision to concentrate one's efforts as a designer on corporate projects, or advertising, or any other kind of design, is a political choice."6 If you fulfill the brief, you choose to agree.

So yes, design is political. It's about values, power and preferences, about ideologies and consequences. And the good news is that there's a growing breed of designers who are political with a small p. They're not campaigning, but problem solving; they're not "master-designers," but democratic in approach.

They're using their skills as designers to illustrate, create and demonstrate opportunities for social change. But the reason for their emergence is that the politics of design itself has changed.

In workshops with both end users and professionals, the opinion of the more articulate often carries more weight. Designers use visual techniques to sidestep this and provide a common and universally accessible platform for contributions. Participatory design work, if done well, can be fundamentally democratic, giving ordinary people a voice and an opportunity to influence outcomes.

The politics of design

For a long time design has been viewed as Design with a big D: the IKEA adverts' clever stereotype of the Designer as taste-maker--the expert whose role it is to make his judgment and impose his vision on others. Now, a revolution is afoot. The success of clunker bikes, eBay and FabLabs point to a breakdown of that designer-consumer power relationship. As Charles Leadbeater puts it: "Design used to be done by specialists for users. From now on, in a growing number of fields, design will be done with users and by them.7 In this context, the designer is becoming the facilitator--the enabler--rather than the dictator of what people themselves want to do.

At the same time there has been a shift in conventional politics; a realization that top-down policies no longer work, and that public services in particular must be redesigned around the user. Conventional policy makers are not readily equipped to do this. Designers are.

RED designing with doctors, nurses, economists and policy makers

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Designers must find new ways of working that enable them to apply their skills where they are most needed - to tackle problems such as chronic health care, climate change and an ageing population.

A growing number of policymakers are collaborating with designers to develop new public services and innovative public policy. Service designers like Live|work are working with regional development agencies to create new rural transport systems, and Engine have collaborated with think tank Demos to help schools create personalised learning. Manzini and Jegou's Sustainable Everyday project demonstrates the power of visual scenarios in proposing alternative ways of living. Others creating tools for social change include Stefan Magdalinski with WriteToThem.com and TheyWorkForYou.com and the BBC's Action Network team. Competitions like the RSA's Design Directions and Metropolis's Next Generation all show that young designers are increasingly concerned with social and political agendas. IIT's Visible Politics work looks at redesigning the experience of voting. Yet still design schools rarely teach their students about politics, and for most this kind of work is out of reach. Designers must find new ways of working that enable them to apply their skills where they are most needed: to tackle complex problems such as chronic health care, climate change and an ageing population.

At RED, we believe an approach we call 'transformation design' can make it happen. Transformation design facilitates collaboration between designers, policymakers, economists, social scientists and ordinary people in order to solve complex socio-economic problems. Together with users and frontline workers, these groups design new systems and services that are both practical and desirable, placing the user at the heart of their development. Transformation design builds the capacity for ongoing innovation in the organisations and institutions it works with. RED has applied this approach to citizenship, health care and energy consumption. We are part of an increasing number of design groups working in this way, and demand is growing.

Policymakers are in desperate need of the skills designers have to create desirable, practical solutions to society's most pressing problems.

In other words, politics needs YOU.

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FOOTNOTES:

1. From an article by Deyan Sudjic in Touching the State, Design Council/ippr 2004. More in The Edifice Complex: How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World

2. Learning Works: The 21st Century Prison, Hilary Cottam etc. Do Tank 2002 ISBN 0-9543055-0-7

3. First Things First Revisited

4. Steven Lukes, Power: a Radical View, Macmillan, (1974)

5. As quoted in an article by Rick Poynor, First Things First Revisited, Emigre magazine

6. Rick Poynor, First Things First Revisited, Emigre magazine

7. Charles Leadbeater, Observer, Sunday June 19 2005
