My Design Philosophy

I604 – Human-Computer Interaction Design Theory

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Overview

Design decisions are based on judgement and judgement is both personal and situational. In the end, design is always an act of faith in our abilities and ourselves.

(Nelson & Stolterman, 2014, p. 204)

This is probably my favorite quote out of all the assigned reading we had for this course as it captures the essence of design on both an individual and collective level. It encapsulates the subjectivity of design and the need of self-inquiry I have always believed in but failed to put into words.

To give some perspective before diving into discussing my design philosophy, other than all the course reading and activities, this paper is mostly inspired by personal experiences of interacting with designers in the industry, my introspection of how I have grown as a designer, and the extrospection of where we are as an industry.

In the following pages, I will start with a brief explanation on how my personal background has influenced who I am as a designer today and how I see design. Then, I will go into detail discussing different elements and idea I consider as the most important when examining and analyzing a design. With that being said, by no means am I trying to have a thorough exploration of any of the concepts or to define them in an objective matter, instead, they are some very subjective reflection of how I perceive different aspects of design.

Another thing that has inspired the structure of this paper was the systemic assessment of *looking around*, *looking into*, and *looking out* of a system proposed by Nelson & Stolterman (2004). I believed that designers while being an individual in the society, are also their own sub-systems, and will benefit greatly by going through a similar self-assessment process, as each of us is all a product of our internal characteristics and the external influences.

In terms of goals to achieve, for me personally, this paper is an attempt at getting a firm grasp of my own core judgment. Hopefully that in the long term, this will evolve into an advocate for designers to be more mindful of looking into who they are and also around the bigger picture where their design exists within.

Personal Background

The more I have looked into myself, the more I have realized how much of my concerns with design and the industry overall came from a very personal space. All the reflections and the course assignments has helped me clarifying and acknowledging the subjectivity of design and the sources for me personally.

Out of them, some that I have identified as the most significant ones are my Taiwanese ethnicity and the prior studies in social geography and library and information science. The Taiwanese background has contributed to my passion of being political-engaged and -awared and the sensitivity of how identity can be constructed and molded. What the experiences in different disciplines has left me with are the deep care of how power can be exerted either through tangible or intangible artifact, how that may affect a place and community and the interplay between them. This has resulted in

For me, these values really are inseparable and impossible to ignore throughout my design process, and have

influenced my design philosophy, which I believe will be evident in the following pages. Thus, I felt it is necessary to lay out these traces from my past before discussing my philosophy to offer the readers a more comprehensive and personal lens.

Philosophy

Throughout my personal journey on what design is and who I am as a designer, I have grown to see design as a process translating one's intention into real-life impact, and that this process can not and should not exist outside the political and cultural context. It is not to say that *Intention* and *Impact* are the only things that constitute the design process for me, but that they are the two most important elements out of any design ecosystem that I would look into whether it is to evaluate my or others' design.

Following is a breakdown of what I believe about design in regards of each of these aspects: intention, impact, political and cultural context.
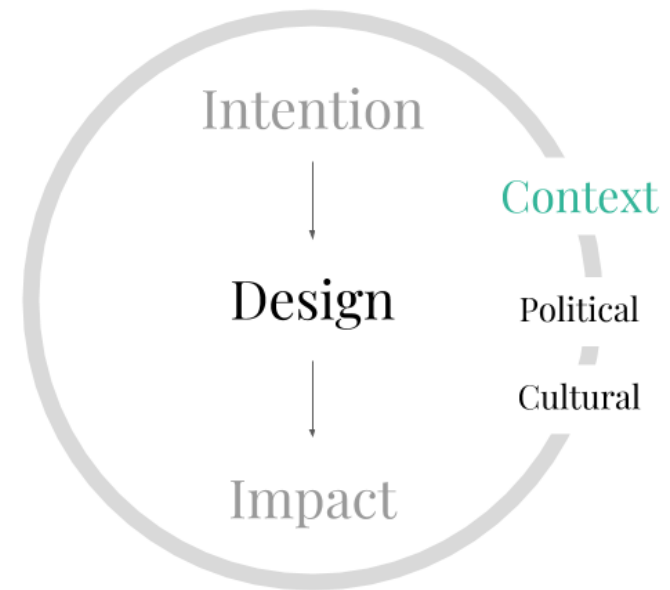
Intention

Intentions for me are the first and maybe the most important element a designer should pay extra attention to, because it is where one's the core judgement comes from (Nelson & Stolterman, 2004), and too often decide how the design structure may evolve (Cross, 2004). They are too often invisible (Nelson & Stolterman, 2004) and Therefore, I believe the foremost job a designer should commit themselves to is be more aware of what their intentions are, and most importantly, to surface where the unconscious-knowing and subconscious-knowing come from. Following by that is to ensure those first intentions are not lost or mitigated too much throughout the design process.

This sort of inquiry of origins is not limited to designer him or herself, but also with the team and clients designer are working with. In addition, this should also be applied onto any creativity process that are making changes to this world due to the fact that everything is a product of design activities (Rittle, 1987) and that everyone can engage in designing today. I do believe that designers, being the ones that holds the awareness, have a larger social responsibility to help uncovering these hidden intentions and intervene.

Impact

Good intentions do not always translate into positive impacts. Moreover, just because some impacts align with the intentions that the designer set out with, it does not guarantee it being a good design that is benefiting the society in large. A smart vending machine aimed at decentralizing and optimizing shopping experience ended up chasing away the local community that flourished in the corner-stores. A crime-reporting form to simplify the process and raise the sense of safety in turn encouraged racist behavior within the community.

With impact overall, I would propose that here are two aspects that a designer should be more mindful for to get a gauge of what impact one's designs have on any individual and the public.

1. Scale
   It has surprised me so much before that a large number of the designers I have talked to did not have a clear idea on how many people they were designing for or to what extent they are actually changing others' lives.
   However, the scale I am to discuss here is not just about user number or revenue generated, while they are very important metrics for designers to know of,

instead, what I would like to bring attention to is the intangible aspect of it. For designers working on social media, the impact they look at should go beyond retention rate or human connectivity and interactions their platform has driven, but how it has changed the value of social interaction and the whole generation's perception on self-worth. Furthermore, what a designer deems as an edge case may be life-threating issues someone encounters every day. The scale of impact is not defined by how the designer sees it, but how the person being affect feels it.

2. Power
    Designers also should be more aware of the power they are exerting onto the public when creating something that will inevitably disrupt the presence. Design as an activity is essentially allocating the resources, distributing advantage and disadvantage and affecting the lives of the many (Rittle, 1987). In addition, this application of power does not only affect the groups designer intentionally designs for, but also the groups designer in turn exclude or not even aware of. A lot of times, our design may have successfully empowered the group we intend for,

but at the same time it may marginalize some minorities even more. The shuttle service offered by the ride-sharing business may have benefit a certain set of employees commuting, but it also affected the adoption and profitability of local buses, which are public goods aimed to serve the all.

Design under the Political & Cultural Context

What draws the connection between the intention and impact is the design itself, and it is where designers have to rely on their judgment to ensure the intention and impact are aligned and for the design to be successful. A designer's judgement largely depends and is limited to his or her limited knowledge and the ability to engage in systematic thinking (Friedman, 2003), as that designers tend to employ the familiarity to explain the unfamiliarity (Schön, 1990).

Moreover, out of all the factors that may go into a designer's judgment on a systematic level, the one I regard the most significant and care about the most personally is the political and cultural context.

Growing up, I have witnessed countless example of how the designers, who either did not care or are ignorant of the political and cultural context, have partake in the process of oppressing our own culture and identity. These designs spanned across the scale. they could be as tiny as a dropdown of country names that misrepresent my identity, which may seem trivial but has a huge effect on us mentally almost every day. Or they could be as large as the education material under the national curriculum which

has fundamentally changed how our society understand ourselves culturally.

The examples I mentioned before were also either unsuccessful or creating unintentional negative impact largely due to the lack of attention on how the design may affect the society politically and culturally.

Conclusion

With this paper, I have chosen to focus on the *design of designer* and the subjective and systemic nature of design due to personal interests and experiences.

To conclude, I firmly believe that every single artifact we design today is a manifestation of the broader society and the designer's identity. They are the tangible expression of power which contribute to the ongoing composition of human traces on a place and community. Individually, what and how one designs roots from one's value and belief system. Collectively, what and how we design define who we are as human (Haskett, 2002).

"Designer entails political commitment" and can never be the neutral creator however we aspire or hope to be (Rittle, 1987, p. 7). It is only when designers realize the significant role of their own value system plays into how they see and do design, acknowledge the limitation and biases that may have caused, and the responsibility for them to engage in an extensive self-inquiry, however *design-of-designing* can actually flourish and generate meaningful and positive changes in the world.

Reference

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