24. Social Design

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Definition and Background

What do we aim to accomplish when we design something? Who do we aim to reach? What is the broader purpose of design? These general questions are an entry point to social design, the notion that people, communities, and their needs should be central to all design decisions to "help promote positive change within society" (Resnick, 2016). Originally connected to the graphic and industrial design fields, social design, or design for social impact, has become more prominent in discussions about design thinking and designing with social justice issues in mind (see Rachael Sullivan's entry on *design ethics* and April O'Brien's entry on *social justice*, for example). At its core, social design challenges the designer to approach design scenarios as a means to "combat social issues" (Shea, 2012). Whether one is designing a public service advertisement for a bus stop or eco-conscious packaging for a consumer product, social design focuses on informing, persuading, and inspiring action toward social good in local and global communities. Social design centers the communal, the people-centric at all junctures of the design process, from its outset, iteration, to conclusion. A natural complement to *usability* and *user-centered design*, framing design scenarios through a social design approach values the user and their lived experience at the center of a design problem.

Social design is a critical thinking approach to help one frame collective design situations where something must be designed and communicated toward a specific, communal end goal. In reflecting on typical graphic design training and persuasive approaches, Victor Margolin (2011/2016) states that "expertise in persuading consumers to purchase products has become highly developed, now persuasion must be applied to promoting positive social behavior such as ethnic and racial tolerance, energy conservation, and overall environmental citizenship" (p. 15). Akin to design schemas such as design thinking that prioritize collaboration, empathy, and audience-centric deliverables, social design encourages industry practitioners, educators, and students to explore designing for those at the margins in order to better reach audiences most impacted by design, be it the design of a public park bench or the design of an immigration and border patrol informational brochure. In *Developing Citizen Designers*, a text of case studies of social design applied in varied settings, Elizabeth Resnick (2016) raises many of the questions that perplex practitioners and scholars in the fields of technical and professional communication or science and technology studies. Resnick wonders

how to help students, colleagues, and clients alike see the applicability and transferability of their work to their communities, arguing that "designers have both a social and a moral responsibility to use their visual language training to address societal issues either within or in addition to their professional design practice" (p. 12). "Designers" here can mean many pursuits: teachers, writers, graphic artists, engineers, and virtually any occupation that creates deliverables for public consumption or use.

▮ Design Application

A strong case of social design in action is that of environmentally focused consumer brands, such as American clothing company Everlane. The company uses biodegradable packaging materials printed with statistics about a garment's material composition, including information about carbon expenditures behind each item produced and human labor hours invested in making each of their garments. This social design approach to their product packaging informs consumers about the material costs behind the goods they are purchasing (and wearing) while persuading their customers to learn more about labor production costs to the planet overall. Such transparent practices show social design working as a type of "design justice" that spotlights power structures and inequalities embedded in broader design contexts (Costanza-Chock, 2018). Social design is therefore an actionable critical thinking tool to use in concert with other design heuristics, continually urging one to spotlight the material impacts of design decisions and how to inspire change through design.

▮ Pedagogical Integration

Students may learn to engage in social design as a way to aspire positive social change. A strategic way to integrate social design in a technical communication classroom is through community partnerships and open classroom discussion of power structures and societal issues in local communities. In consultation with the community partner (e.g., local businesses, federal agencies, or nonprofit organizations), the instructor may incorporate social design assignments that align with the learning objectives of the course. In a document design course, for instance, students may create visual or interactive documents that make design injustices more apparent (such as infographics or webtexts highlighting social design issues) for instructional or educational use by the partner organization. Using social design in the assignment, the students and instructor would carefully research and analyze the audiences most impacted by the documents (for example, underserved neighborhoods or specific demographic groups) and offer actions for readers/viewers to take. It is important to remember that the outcome of social design is more than just creating transparent communication materials; it is a deliberate effort to affect change through design and inspire action.

To ensure students have the opportunity to grapple with social issues, the instructor should coach them in ways to inquire information from participating community partners, audiences, and other stakeholders, and synthesize the critical impact of the identified issues in these groups' respective situations. Students may investigate the power and decision-making structures in their partner organization in order to understand the sources of authority and legitimacy or analyze the targeted audience of the project, carefully considering their positionality and needs. As a learning exercise, students may use these findings to fabricate a design solution to the specified social issue. The design project should conclude with a collective reflection by the students and community partners to assess the impact of their work.

■ References and Recommended Readings

Berman, D. B. (2008). *Do good design: How design can change our world*. Peachpit Press.

Costanza-Chock, S. (2018). Design justice: Towards an intersectional feminist framework for design theory and practice. In *Proceedings of the Design Research Society*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3189696

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Shea, A. (2012). *Designing for social change: Strategies for community-based graphic design*. Princeton Architectural Press.