UTOPIA AND DESIGN OF SOCIETY

DESIGN AND ITS WILD CARDS

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ABSTRACT

This intensive full day workshop will engage its participants in a two stage process of 1) discussion of societal designs and 2) an exploration of using utopia as a method for discussing desirable futures.

INTRODUCTION

Our world is in a severe state. Climate change, growing inequality, financial crises, unemployment, destruction of biodiversity and habitats, and depletion of natural resources are examples of the greatest challenges we are facing, and there are practically no commonly shared visions that could guide our societies towards global, sustainable long term solutions.

We believe that design, as an inherently transdisciplinary and integrative practice and activity, could make significant contributions to this (Kommonen 2001). However, this requires that the design field and those involved must develop new competences and understandings of fields that they may not have thought about as relevant for design, and that we can find and develop relevant communities of both experts and citizens that welcome the contributions from our direction.

The aim of this workshop is to take steps in that direction. The workshop invites a group of participants who are interested in exploring a design oriented way to create ideas of serious utopias – i.e. what kind of a society we would like to have in the future.

THEME OF WORKSHOP

The theme of the workshop is "Utopia and design of society", and it is divided into two stages.

MORNING: DISCUSSING AND ANALYZING SOCIETAL DESIGNS

We propose that useful design discussions can be initiated if we are able to broaden the understanding and discussion of what designs are, and what are designs.

Several key authors in the field of design have highlighted how design is a universal human activity and how everyday life and society are permeated with design (e.g. Cross 2006; Krippendorff 2006; Nelson & Stolterman 2012; Papanek 1971). However, most of these tend to discuss the topic from the point of view of the designer or the design activity, which leaves the point of view of society and of citizens, as well as the kinds of design processes that are not designer led but perhaps more of emergent nature, less elaborated.

With *societal designs* we refer to designs and design features such as structures, institutions, laws, customs, practices, social systems, concepts, ideologies, beliefs, and so on (Kommonen 2013; Schneider & Ingram 1997; Ostrom 2005; Benkler 2006; Wright 2010; Unger 1996; Lessig 2006).

We invite the participants to explore ways how the design of society can be discussed in a useful way, through the examples they bring to the workshop. In the morning session we will discuss the designs brought to the workshop and try to analyze them, and conclude by reflecting on what we can learn about society through this kind of an analytical lens.

AFTERNOON: UTOPIA 2040

In the afternoon session, we will move on to develop together ideas of a desirable future society in the year 2040, based on ideas of participants, and try to employ design language in our work, and by also potentially employing some of the designs we have discussed earlier as building blocks for the utopias.

The term *utopia* comes from Thomas More's book of the same name (More 1516), and has turned into a generic label for depictions of alternative societal models. Ruth Levitas proposes that utopia can be used as a method, as it:

"facilitates genuinely holistic thinking about possible futures, combined with reflexivity, provisionality and democratic engagement with the principles and practices of those futures. And it requires us to think about our conceptions of human needs and human flourishing in those possible futures. The core of utopia is the desire for being otherwise, individually and

collectively, subjectively and objectively. Its expressions explore and bring to debate the potential contents and contexts of human flourishing. It is thus better understood as a method than a goal." (Levitas 2013)

CONCLUSIONS

In the concluding stage, we will discuss the problematics encountered during the exercise: e.g. the difficulties and benefits of the utopian thinking and our ability to approach and envision a description of a desirable society; the feasibility and usefulness of design analysis and utopia as methods in such a limited exercise; how these experiences can help us to foresee their value in some larger context? Will some of the work done in this workshop form interesting *building blocks* for future utopia and design fiction work? And, finally, what did we learn about design in society and societal design?

POSITION PAPERS

In this workshop, we ask the participants to prepare beforehand some thoughts and material for both morning and afternoon sessions:

1) One or more examples of societal designs: some structures, activities, functions, institutions that the participant feels s/he can analyze or describe *employing design language*
2) Ideas for Utopia 2040: descriptions of participants' ideas of what a desirable society in the year 2040 should be like.

More specific guidelines are given on the workshop website (below), where position papers must be uploaded.

HOW TO PARTICIPATE?

The workshop requires the participants to prepare their personal introductions and utopia materials as a position paper beforehand on the workshop website at https://wiki.aalto.fi/display/NORDES2015UtopiaWS

The site will include also more information, pre-workshop readings and more detailed guidelines for submissions. Participants are requested to familiarize themselves with the introductions and materials before the event.

For more information, please contact Mia Muurimäki at mia.muurimaki@aalto.fi.

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