WHAT IS YOUR CRITICAL APPROACH? DESIGN, POWER AND PROXIMITY

ARTICULATONS, ENGAGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This workshop explores strategies and tactics for "doing" critique in and through design research, The workshop invites design researchers from both descriptive-analytical fields and practise based and experimental fields to discuss the possibilities of critique and critical approaches in design research. The workshop invokes notions of critical distance and proximity through discussions of empirical examples provided by the organisers and participants in tandem. Participants will introduce themselves through a short, informal presentation of their work and its critical questions. Together, these case examples and questions will provide a frame for thinking about the critical capacities of descriptive-analytical and constructive design research in relation to systemic infrastructures, institutions and power. The aim of the workshop is to investigate how design researchers position themselves as critical and / or post-critical agents in research projects with collaborators situated in a range of ways. The intended outcome is a selection of critical guiding questions and strategic considerations generated by participants together as a resource for design researchers and practitioners working at the critical edge(s) of networks, systems, technologies and institutions.

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean for constructive design research to be critical? This workshop explores this question through three hours of collective analysis and exploration by participants, as we discuss the critical questions in our own design research and work towards developing understandings of design and power in practice. The question of the role of the "critical" in design research has been raised in recent years through various distinct research practises in a number of different design research environments. For example, design and critique are linked through different versions of critical design (Dunne 1999) Here the focus is typically on design's capacity to engage publics through "imaginative thought" (Dunne & Raby 2013), as when highly aestheticized critical objects are exhibited in museums or art galleries. Such artful proposals offer critique and debate through the careful crafting of media, concepts and objects that display often distant dystopian/utopian futures and super-fictive realities (Mazé 2013). More recently, related speculative trajectories have worked to incorporate participatory perspectives in the staging of public engagement. This is a move partly inspired by an uptake of ideas from science and technology studies, which leads to, for example, the deployment of speculative prototypes with the purpose of raising public debate around emerging technologies (Beaver et al. 2009; Kerridge 2015). Here, projects are particularly animated by the democratic project of Bruno Latour (2008, 2010) and the question of *how* things are made public (Latour & Weibel 2005).

Ideas and concepts from the constructivist social sciences and critical theory are also informing design research rooted more firmly in activist and participatory traditions. Co-design research projects, for example, are typically more interested in procedures of representation, alternative publics and the design of infrastructures than in the design of discrete objects and technologies (Ehn 2008; Björgvinsson et al. 2010; Binder et al. 2011; Karasti 2014). At the same time, design researchers and practitioners in Participatory Design are drawing on feminist epistemologies of embodied, relational, and

collective knowledge in design engagements and in designed infrastructures (Lindström & Ståhl 2014). Through these frameworks, designer-researchers are beginning to imagine what constitutes design practices and sites of designing both beyond methods and tools as replicable outcomes, and toward generative knowledge-making as collaborative practice (Suchman 2002; Light and Akama 2012, 2014; Akama 2015; Agid 2016). This includes close-to-the-ground examinations of group-generated local infrastructures for organizing capacity, making decisions, and producing change (or maintenance of local practices) (Karasti and Baker 2004; Karasti and Syrjänen 2004), as well as the role of disruption (Akama et al 2015), attuning to specific contexts (Light and Akama 2012), and tolerating discomfort and in-between-ness (Akama 2015; Agid 2016) all as generative of what Binder, Brandt, Ehn and Halse (2015) have called "democratising democracy" through engaged design with people and their social, spatial, and political contexts.

There seems to be one move, from within some design research environments that seeks to replace critical and analytical distance associated with modernity (Latour 1991) with a cosmopolitical approach (Stengers 2005; Latour 2010; Marres 2012). This is a research approach that brings to the fore a normative question of how we may craft a good common world through situated and experimental analysis (Latour 2004; Clement, et. al. 2012). This, in combination with a reinvigorated interest in American pragmatism, particularly in the writings of John Dewey (Dewey 2012 [1927]), has turned the construction of publics, into a central question for some parts of constructive design research. Simultaneously, the focus on relational components of collaborative and participatory design practices has highlighted possibilities for critical reflection on such practice and its historical, geographical, and interpersonal elements, especially as they intersect with experiences of power and difference (Lee 2008; Light 2010; Agid 2011). Taken together, these modes of critical "doing" and "making" in and through design research with people, institutions, and infrastructures suggest a range of approaches – both theoretical and experimental – to addressing questions and relationships of power in design research.

One implication for "doing" critique inspired by post-structuralist thinkers is to avoid any premature references to abstract panoramas such as capitalist exploitation or taken for granted hierarchies. Fundamentally, a post-critical disposition (Latour 2005; Bruun Jensen 2014) will complicate any simple procedural or methodological understanding of what it means to be critical, and refuse to know in advance how emergent configurations of humans and non-humans may lend themselves to issues of power and critique. Critique then, is no longer a particular program the researcher subscribes to, but rather, a kind of excess that may overflow a research engagement, if successful (Olander 2016). One example is the suggestive concept of a minor design activism (Lenskjold, Olander & Halse (2015). Here the critical position is generated from *within* hegemonic institutional structures and agendas, as the design researcher takes on the role as a curiosity-driven experimenter in policy driven innovation projects. This activist agency and critical mode is experimentally and immanently generated only as a given design project unfolds. However, while a critical engagement in contemporary design research does not necessarily imply a researcher critiquing a given phenomenon from a distant position, we may certainly ask, what is lost when the design process itself is almost fetishized, perhaps through a radical commitment to experimentation (Olander 2014)?

At the same time, scholars in Cultural Studies argue that critical research does not presume the conditions or critical understandings of such conditions, or "conjunctures," prior to specific and situated research into them, and also does not presume that conditions hold steady over time, requiring a situated analysis (Hall et al 2013 [1978]; Grossberg 2010). However, they suggest that understandings of the present moment are informed and shaped by how we also understand the social-political histories that produce them, and are, therefore, deeply contextual, even as they are also emergent. Design researchers may enter a design space with or through the critical work of a collaborating organization, seeking to build ideas and infrastructures that are intended to be alternatives to, or in resistance to, hegemonic institutional structures and agendas from *outside* them. This approach might be grounded in specific critical inquiry into the historical, political, and social conditions of a given institution, like "the right to vote in the United States," or of an emergent moment, such as "rising police violence." At the same time, it may also raise a corollary risk to the fetishization of design noted above, if a focus on longer horizons might sometimes raise complex conflicts with ideas for design moves in the here and now.

Given these various and varied critical research approaches and their socio-political and infrastructural contexts, how do we shape design research engagements with people and institutions in these spaces of critical inquiry and making? And, where might people – design researchers and collaborators – define or describe processes and outcomes that are not yet possible, but neither purely speculative nor unimaginable, at least to some? Is it really possible to be deeply immersed in the design of products, practises and services while still maintaining a critical edge to the very institutional systems, infrastructures and power relations that the design project itself is explicitly trying to change? Is there still room for speculation and critique from design that goes beyond what is practical and pragmatically possible in the here-now? How may design researchers conduct critical research by mobilising the unthinkable and the unimaginable that enable questions to be raised in alternative ways?

In this workshop, we will consider a range of questions, including these, and those generated from participants' case studies and stories, as we think across intersections of contemporary fields of design research, including Participatory Design, Co-design, Design for Social Innovation, Service Design, Transformation Design, Speculative Design and contemporary theoretical fields, including, science and technology studies, actor network theory, critical theory, feminist technoscience etc. By way of example, and as a start to this investigation, the authors offer two case studies below the workshop outline, taking up two different contexts, in two different countries, to begin to imagine a range of possible parameters, conditions, positions, and locations for design research seeking to produce capacities for change and /or critical thinking, making and doing from inside and outside institutional and systemic infrastructures. Please note, these cases are longer and more detailed than what we're asking participants to send/prepare.

WORKSHOP FORMAT

This workshop will build on the voices and experiences of participants, with the specific goal of working across the disciplines and focus areas of all. To facilitate this, participants in this workshop are asked to send ahead, or bring, a one-paragraph informal case example of a site, project, or experience in designing that raises questions about design researchers' and collaborators' critical approaches in design research engagements, along with one to two images, and one central critical question raised in or through this work. If possible, please send these to sol@kadk.dk and agids@newschool.edu by June 13th, so we can compile and share them before the workshop. We will use these for introductions. *[NOTE: If you do not have a case, please join us, still. Send a question that brings you to this workshop, and an image, if you have one in mind.]*

The workshop itself will be organised in three parts:

1. Participants (including the organisers) will introduce themselves through one-minute presentations of the case sent in ahead, presented in two to three slides – including one to two images and the critical question arising from the case. These are meant to be quick introductions that will also ground the conversation moving forward.

2. Organisers will create small groups by topics and question focus, in which participants will analyse and begin to map the critical engagements across their work. This will include an investigation of what institutions, infrastructures, people, relationships of power and / or exchange, and the designed elements / actions / engagements that connect them can be found in and / or across them. In addition, groups will put forward theoretical reflections on the cases, asking if they represent speculative, impossible, minor activism, and / or critical theory approaches.

3. Finally, the organisers will provide descriptions of "power" from a range of fields through which the full group will investigate the small group findings and work together to create a list of key critical questions, sites of design research engagement, and the relationships of power that might be seen or affected through design at those sites.

The aim of the workshop is to generate a rough frame for mapping critical capacities of and key questions in contemporary design research related to systemic infrastructures, institutions, and their relative relationships to understanding, revealing, and making power. This could become a reservoir for design researchers and practitioners engaged in design at the critical edge(s) of networks, systems, technologies and institutions.

CASE EXAMPLE #1
CRITIQUE AS AN INVITATION TO DESIGN ALTERNATIVES TO POLICING AS ONE WAY OF CREATING INCREASED WELL-BEING

One of the case stories that informs this workshop's framing is based in one organiser's long-term design-research engagement with Critical Resistance (CR), a US-based social justice organization working to end the prison industrial complex (PIC). CR defines the PIC as "the overlapping interests of government and industry that designate surveillance, policing and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems" (2004, 59). CR members work to abolish the PIC by building capacity to organise toward three goals: dismantling the systems that make up the PIC; changing the contexts in which those systems operate and the impacts they have on people most subject to them; and building alternatives ways of attending to the harms the PIC is meant to curb, and the many harms - such as racism, sexism, or xenophobia - it perpetuates.

This research engagement focused on design and organizing work through which participants first imagined and then built the Oakland Power Projects (OPP), in which CR members interview residents about their experiences and desires in the city as a means of finding ways *other than* policing to sustain and support them. The aim of this process is to create lasting resources that both nurture local self-determination and well-being and limit police contact and influence. OPP takes place at the intersection of three infrastructures: the local infrastructure of the group, the large-scale infrastructure of the systems of policing, surveillance, and imprisonment with which their political work deals, and the imagined (future) infrastructures the work itself seeks to create. While the goal of abolishing policing is for many politically radical, CR members frame this long-term goal as one rooted in understandings of policing specifically as a system of harm with a history of race, class, and gender violence in the United States.

The aim to end policing is, then, also an aim to create freedom from the harms that institution can cause, and also create alternative means of addressing other harms that happen between people, some of which are also linked to lack of resources for other services typically offered through institutions large and small, like health care, education, etc.

The critical socio-historical framework that grounds CR's work, and therefore the design work, as well, presumes the inherent violence of institutions of control and punishment, and therefore, rather than seeking to change or re-design them to be less harmful, seeks instead to design otherwise. The question presented here, then, is how might design engage in imagining a future without police by working with people to build systems and infrastructures for well-being in the immediate? Or, more broadly, how might design engagements grounded in systemic critique draw from and contribute to understandings of those structures while also designing *outside* them to produce meaningful alternatives?

CASE EXAMPLE #2
CRITIQUE AS AN ONLY SLIGHTLY AGITATED
VERSION OF THE EVERYDAY

Another case story that informs this workshop is a long-term research collaboration between a municipality and a design school related the opening of a new integrated library and cultural house in an international urban neighbourhood. In this case the municipality were offered funding from public authorities to involve residents in an open innovation process. The funding was given with two purposes in mind. The first was to involve local residents directly in the design of cultural activities and events related to the soon to open new building. The second was to contribute to the on-going exploration and debate on the transformation of the library sector. As such, this research collaboration was a policy driven research initiative with a focus on both very local and situated concerns but also on broader issues, like for example how citizens are encouraged to step forward in public libraries. The research project was laid out in a program that described the research methodology of co-design and the intended outcomes of the project. The plans for the new combined library and cultural centre were explained in strategic papers and renderings from politicians, decision makers and architects. These promoted a future library as a cultural hub for active and engaged citizens, and a library institution that shifted its focus from the archive and material collection to the work of providing effective digital services to citizens.

The inclination here, for a critical or post-critical design approach is typically to find ways to counter or open these dominant and well-rendered images of futures and citizens. The question however is, can this be done from "within" the very structures and institutional systems that the research project is actively trying to alter?

Further, in this case, the design project itself was challenged on a more practical and pragmatic level, since the schedule for the opening of the new building was changed several times during the research project. This meant that various prototyping plans in the new house had to be postponed or completely cancelled. In some ways we may consider all these interferences as contingent factors that work only to limit researchers abilities to conduct critical or post-critical research. We may see these very mundane conditions for doing research as imposed on research from the outside, or alternatively, as conditions that the researcher is always already embedded in and therefore also in some way dependant upon? In this case, the research project proceeded by setting up an open co-design studio below the "old" library, to prototype open cultural activities around making with local residents, focusing on the sharing of knowledge and materials across ethnicities and generations in the neighbourhood. These activities took form as a series of small events around repair and mending, but evolved into bigger network of experiments shared among librarians, residents and researchers. Here the research project shifted its original focus, from the future of the combined library and cultural institution, to an exploration of everyday life in the residential area. Seen from the outside this may not come across as a particularly critical approach, insofar as all research activities were still contained and accounted for in relation to the original public innovation program. But as the community around everyday making in the library grew, new images and alternative visions for local residents and their relation to the public library emerged. Visions that were very different from the smooth renderings and activity plans that researchers and residents were presented with at the beginning of the project.

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