

POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF DESIGN ACTIVISM AND THE PUBLIC SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

Design activism has a long historical pedigree. From the declarations of William Morris through to the manifestos of the Italian radical design movement a hundred years later, it has been typified as standing in opposition to the corporatism of the capitalist world: a refusal to ‘obey the giant’. In recent years it has re-emerged in alliance with a number of global political issues including responses to Peak Oil, climate change, food shortages, social justice, the digital divide, demographic change, military conflict, sexual equality and orientation, financialisation and global economic recession.

The term implies a voluntarist, politically-motivated impetus: a desire for amelioration, to make a ‘better world’. In recent years, the economic arguments for adopting many activist practices has been increasingly made. In short, adopting ethical guidelines, sustainability, equality in the workplace, and so on, has been presented as making ‘good business sense’. For designers, orientating themselves to such issues engages a number of specific elements that gives them competitive advantage. Undertaking *pro bono* work, specialising in niche expertise such as ageing or ecology or even taking on particular

campaigns all provide opportunities for design consultants to differentiate themselves in a tight marketplace.

The growth of design work in the public sector also resonates with changes in the role and operations of a welfare state. The increased sub-contracting of public sector services to private firms, charities, voluntary groups and NGOs by many national and regional governments in the developed world has created a new raft of opportunities. Here, then, the activist designer can be engaged, for money, in fulfilling, or, at least, partially-fulfilling their concerns for social and environmental agency. In the United Kingdom, for example, the establishment of the notion of ‘big society’ by the Conservative-dominated government implies a downloading of previously held state responsibilities to the third sector and citizens. There is a broad compliance with these politics within discourses of service design. But, additionally, design activists find themselves, albeit sometimes uncomfortably, implicated in these processes.

What, then, is the notion of ‘value’ for the designer and client in such circumstances? There seems to be a shift in the measurement and calibration of

this notion. And, if so, how does the designer actually make a living? What other forms of value is the designer conspiring with? How do the economics of design activism lead to a different kind of practice?

This paper considers such questions through two lenses. One is the macro political economy shifts in public sector processes. The other draws on the micro experience of having been involved in an experimental inner-city, urban regeneration project as a design practitioner. Rather than make this latter practical and empirical work a core case study, around which general principles are generated, I draw from it as an example in a more speculative and suggestive way.

INTRODUCTION

Design history tells us two things. One is that the design profession has always been shaped by economic, social, political and cultural forces. The other is that many designers and design educators are idealists. These two issues remain in conflict. The former suggests that design is a passive, pragmatic activity destined to respond to the ebbs and flows of local and global change. It is driven by service to wider interests. But designers are also interested in improving on what exists. Nonetheless, despite a history of reformists, from John Ruskin, Henry Cole and William Morris to Walter Gropius to Buckminster Fuller to Tomas Maldonado to Victor Papanek to the Italian radical movement advocated by such groups as Superstudio and Archizoom, designers continue to express consternation at the gap between their ideals and the reality of what is around them. They are, arguably, historical examples of design activism. This is perennially felt by graduating design students as they collide with the professional world of design. As Adrian Forty famously argued, 'both conditions [the idealistic and the realistic] invariably co-exist, however uncomfortably, in the work of design' (Forty 1986: 242).

Design activism as a form of contestation therefore has a long historical pedigree. From the declarations of William Morris through to the manifestos of the Italian radical design movement a hundred years later, it has been typified as standing in opposition to the corporatism of the capitalist world: a refusal to 'obey the giant'. Fuad-Luke (2009: 27) puts forward a definition of design activism as, 'design thinking, imagination and practice applied knowingly or

unknowingly to create a counter narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental and/or economic change'. It could be claimed that design activism has as long a pedigree as the profession itself. The emergent, modern conception of design in the latter half of the nineteenth century located it in terms of an 'added value' that was to temper a Kantian notion of endless production that filled out the later industrial revolution. Design was an ethical challenge that harnessed taste and control as against the rampant commercialism of modern production and consumer culture (Dutta 2009). Thus, as propogated by John Ruskin, William Morris, Christopher Dresser and their progenies, design was to be a moral filtering system. Since the early 1970s, design for social need and ecological concerns have been recurrent themes, as witnessed by the enduring success of Victor Papanek's seminal text *Design for the Real World* (1972), that became an international cult book for designers and non-designers alike.

The activist impulse amongst many designers has been given further impetus since 2000. This has re-emerged in alliance with a number of global political issues including responses to Peak Oil, climate change, food shortages, social justice, the digital divide, demographic change, military conflict, sexual equality and orientation, financialisation and global economic recession. Some of these themes are echoed in such books as *Massive Change: A Manifesto for the Future Global Design Culture* (Mau 2004) and *Design Like You Give a Damn: Architectural Responses to Humanitarian Crises* (Architecture for Humanity 2006). In these accounts, following in the footsteps of Papanek, the designer's work keys into globalist ambitions wherein expertise is lent to specific local challenges (such as fresh water or mobility) as part of a world view on responsibility. Here, creative solutions are largely technical before they are social.

There is another design activist approach that foregrounds social practices. This focuses on innovations that individuals or communities create for themselves, seeing that 'unofficial customization' of resources may be of significance. The designer's job is to recognise these, facilitate their development and possible up-scaling. Thus, for example, turning informal arrangements for lift-sharing into a neighbourhood scheme supported by internet booking may be a social innovation that the designer develops upon (Manzini and Jegou 2004). In this approach the emphasis is on the small-scale and local and on the analysis of the everyday ways by which people live and their capabilities. While this verve for localism maybe a starting point, it is accepted that cultures are not territorilized but exist in extended relational networks and flows. Thus, to borrow from Fraser and Wenginger (2008:1438) the design activist enters into these networks and becomes 'part of the dynamic that produces futures'.

This paper is mostly concerned with the latter of these activist approaches. Its interest is in systems of leveraging, wherein design is employed to identify and harness potentialities. This might exist in both design activist and public sector scenarios. More specifically, I should like to explore what happens when these two come together. What, then, is the notion of 'value' for the designer and client in such circumstances? There seems to be a shift in the measurement and calibration of this notion. And, if so, how does the designer actually make a living? What other forms of value is the designer conspiring with? How do the economics of design activism lead to a different kind of practice?

This paper draws from the experience of a real-life design activist consultancy project undertaken for regional governmental clients undertaken by the paper's presenter and an interdisciplinary research team. Within this, it identifies how the process and meaning of design might be re-orientated. Ultimately, it speculates that the notion of 'value' for design in the activist setting isn't, in fact, far from more mainstream commercial practices.

UPLOADING TO THE PUBLIC SECTOR

In recent years, the economic arguments for adopting many activist practices has been increasingly made. In short, adopting ethical guidelines, sustainability, equality in the workplace, and so on, has been presented as making 'good business sense'. For designers, orientating themselves to such issues engages a number of specific elements that gives them competitive advantage. Undertaking *pro bono* work, specialising in niche expertise such as ageing or ecology or even taking on particular campaigns all provide opportunities for design consultants to differentiate themselves in a tight marketplace. Dorland (2009), for example, reports on how a Canadian graphic design consultancy values *pro bono* work in terms of its capacity to build profile for the agency while also providing an opportunity for in-house personal development – it works as a test-bed where creative ideas can be experimented. Undertaking work for free is more risk-free. Clients who are not paying are more likely to be grateful for than critical of the end result.

At the same time, designers have benefitted from an expansion of opportunities in the public sector that have opened doors for those with a more public service ethos. In the United Kingdom, the Design Council's (2005) *Business of Design* survey showed that 'public administration, health and education' make up 22 per cent of the total clients for design businesses, while the *British Design Industry Valuation Survey* shows a steady rise in the number of design businesses doing work for public sector or non-profit clients over the past few years: in 2000/01 (the first year of the survey), twenty-five per cent of agencies did this kind of work; by 2004/05 it was forty-nine per cent. (BDI 2003; BDI 2005). This might be viewed as part and parcel of a shift in the public sector wherein citizens become consumers of state services. Design is implicated into this

marketisation process, it playing a mediating role in shifting perceptions of public services from their being a state provision to a state service (see Moor 2009).

As part of this, design may be employed to help deliver 'best value' of services, to cut costs and therefore relieve the burden on governmental budgets and, ultimately, the tax payer. An example of this is the UK graphics company Corporate Document Services that provides print management services that helps local authorities reduce their costs and the efficiency of their publication processes (CDS 2008).

The marketisation of public services also creates a denser landscape of management and, indeed, design opportunities. Broadly, this has been the result of a shift in the public sector itself toward adopting more corporate work styles. During the past two past decades, local government across much of Europe, the USA and Australasia has engaged with the so-called New Public Management. In brief, this form of public sector organization includes a shift toward more entrepreneurial management, explicit standards and measurement of performance, an emphasis on output controls, decentralization of services, the promotion of competition, a stress on private sector styles of management and the disciplining of resource allocation (Osborne and McLaughlin 2002; Du Gay 2004).

The stereotypical era of large-scale, monolithic and mostly unchanging bureaucracies of local government – the public administration approach – may have ended in the 1980s. This does not, however, mean that it has been replaced by wholly light-touch, decentralised and flexible systems. In fact, according to Hoggett (1996), the New Public Management displays three interlocking layers of strategy that are, perhaps necessarily, in conflict. Firstly, operational output may be decentralised from national to local levels but also outwards from local authority level to subcontracted companies or groups – what Whitfield (2006) calls 'agentification' – while policy and strategy are increasingly centralised to the national government. Secondly, the introduction of competition running through this quasi-decentralisation process becomes the dominant model for coordinating it. Thirdly, performance management and audit have emerged as ways to measure and give accountability to the first two strategies. In all these cases, design opportunities abound. Publicity for the myriad of sub-contractees has to be created. For example, Whitfield shows how the management of a school that involved simply interacting with a local authority that previously provided all ancillary services to sub-contracting to a plethora of agencies including privatised school meal providers, buildings and facilities maintenance companies, after-school care voluntary groups, outsourced school transport, ICT and special educational needs resources and teacher supply agencies. This marketisation of services calls for a much greater number of relationships with external bodies and more frequent decision-making on the part of school

managers. It also creates evermore numbers of sub-contractee organisations that might represent themselves within this system: more logos, more corporate documents, more public sector orientated products, more relations. Within this marketisation of services, additionally, processes of competitive tendering and pitching require more desktop publishing input. Equally, the commissioning client, such as a local government authority or a public health body, requires quality control in order to ensure 'best value'. Thus reporting systems have to be structured and communicated.

If more opportunities for design are a fall-out of this process, then the *idea* of design, as an innovating and differentiating practice, has also become gradually embedded into governance. At the heart of much thinking behind this 'shake-up' of local authorities is the demand for a move toward greater innovation on the part of local government (and, indeed, all other aspects of state, including policing, healthcare and education). In Australia and the UK, this was clearly embedded into government thinking from the late 1990s (Considine and Lewis 2007). The UK Government's White Paper, 'Innovation Nation' (Dept. for Innovation, Skills and Universities 2008) lists climate change, the ageing population, globalisation and higher expectations of public sector users as drivers of the need for innovative approaches to service delivery. Within this paper, the UK Design Council's 'Design of the Times' (henceforward referred to as Dott 07) programme of eight design and social innovation projects is cited as a best-practice case. Dott 07 prototyped, among many themes, new forms of welfare service delivery and energy consumption reduction strategies in north east England. This is a typical example of a central government's supporting 'best practice' examples of modernization ahead of legislation (Newman et al. 2001) – an entrepreneurial initiative is championed as a 'beacon of excellence' for other localities to follow, regardless of whether the infrastructural support for this exists elsewhere or not. More generally, the role of design and its contribution to a new culture of innovation in both private and public sectors is mentioned on just about every page of the 'Innovation Nation' document.

It would seem that designers might be well-poised to play a central role in this new culture of public sector innovation, uploading their expertise to governmental interests and activities. The extent to which their role may be termed as 'activist' is perhaps a moot point. Bluntly, designers may be exploiting opportunities within the public and third sectors for commercial gain. Equally, they may present a 'caring face' as part of their own brand building. However, on the other hand, the increasing awareness of the public sector – or indeed pressure on it – to adopt innovatory approaches to such issues as governance, climate change or demographic change suggest that something of an activist impulse on

the part of the designer becomes part of the package that may need to offer.

DOWNLOADING FROM THE PUBLIC SECTOR

This last possibility for designers has implications for the way designers who are engaged with public sector project might work in the future. Let us return to the Design Council. In its role as a thinktank on new knowledge, it cultivated a particular approach to the processes and uses of design that keyed in with changes in public sector discourse. Between 2004 and 2006, the Design Council housed RED, a unit set up to tackle social and economic issues through design-led innovation. Spearheaded by its director, Hilary Cottam, RED developed co-creation approaches to the design of public services such as health, schools and prisons. Such projects foregrounded the intermediary role that design may play between citizens and the state. This way of thinking was set out in RED's document *Touching the State* (2004). It argued that,

Design, after all, is not just about producing effective and attractive objects.. Designers ... are trained to analyse and improve processes, exchanges and encounters – between customer and products, clients and services or, potentially, between citizens and States. They are, or should be, rehearsed at looking at the larger picture, and identifying where an object, or process, fits in the user's life ... government institutions don't for the most part look at civic encounters in this way. No one seems to be thinking about the citizen's journey through even a single encounter – from, say, the arrival of the first summons letter from the jury service, to the final goodbye – let alone through the course of a life.

This statement reflects the growing importance of service design as a specialism. Indeed, arch proponents of service design such as the agencies Engine and Live!Work had close relationships to many Design Council projects from 2000 onwards. Service design focuses on the user experience through a set of actions such as checking in at an airport, diagnosing and treating diabetes or undertaking jury service. It therefore involves the orchestration of multiple artefacts (eg. a combination of web, smart-card, products) and their positioning and sequencing. It is very much concerned with the *relations* and *exchanges* that go on between actors and artifacts within a system. The importance and value of one aspect of a one of these is thus highly dependent on others. Drawing on science and technology studies and practice theory, in design theoretical terms this might represent a turn from 'design thinking' to 'design-as-practice' (Julier 2007, Kimbell 2009).

Within service design, the notion that in order to get the best fit of user and service, delivery may have to be

highly personalised. Its design method may therefore involve deep user research in order to understand the variety of requirements and experiences that they engage. In addition notice may be taken of small scale innovations that users and producers of services create themselves, seeing that their 'unofficial customization' may be of significance and applicability that can be up-scaled.

Service design has been of particular interest to public sector thinking in the UK government. Strategy documents such as *Building on Progress: Public Services* (2007) lay important emphasis on the role of design in the creation of personalized public services in which users play a more participative role both in their configuration and their delivery. The pedigree of this thinking itself leads back to the influence Charles Leadbeater (himself an associate of RED) (Leadbeater 2000, Leadbeater 2008). Leadbeater's position that much can be made of the intrinsic creativity of citizens, 'empowered' through the free-flow of information, in turn means that solutions to complex challenges can also provide cost-effective innovations.

The downloading of action and responsibility to citizens in public services that is implicit in this thinking leads from and to the question of public sector budgets. The government commissioned *Cox Review of Creativity in Business* (Cox 2005) noted the rise of spending on health and education from £128b in 2002 to a projected £200b in 2008. None the less, given pressures such as an ageing population, it was also noted that there was a need to take a more innovative, strategic and holistic view on expenditure in order to deliver value for money. In 2008, the magazine of the Design Council ran a discussion entitled 'Can we deliver better public services for less money?' (Bichard 2008). In the context of post credit crunch rising national debt and foreseeing the squeezing of public sector spending, this debate was apposite. Tellingly, Ben Reason, director of Live!Work, remarks, 'we need to change our relationship with public services, from one where we just expect things to be there for us, to one where we're more engaged in ensuring we don't need them, or managing our way through them.' Avoiding 'unnecessary' use of and making judicious choices within them is therefore also a way of saving public money.

This attitude puts the onus on individual responsibility rather than the system itself (Perks 2008). As such it might be viewed as a downloading programme wherein citizens are expected to voluntarily take on the processes, and indeed of costs, of public sector service delivery. Design can be employed to ease and make reasonable that transition.

DESIGN ACTIVISM AND CRISIS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Let us now look more pointedly at the relationship of design to the sector. Shifts in policy approaches

discussed above coincide with a raft of crises that coarsen through governance. They deeply affect the way we think and act, in particularly in relation to the future of our cities. A number of stresses are being felt in cities. These include the continuing problems of poverty and inequality; environmental threats are mounting as the climate changes; and economic uncertainty and hardship have worsened as the speculative, free-market model exhibits a major crisis compounded by energy and other resource scarcities and associated price inflation (Girardet, 2008; Hopkins, 2008; Dorling, 2010). These stresses make it imperative to find new ways of creating city futures to respond to ecological overstretch, social friction and economic malaise.

There are two contexts working together, here. On the one hand, the state recognizes the palpable challenges it is faced with and its limitations in confronting them. On the other, the process of downloading invites or even coerces a wider range of participants in providing responses to them. Problem solving and governance are expected to be shared across a range of actors. The 'big society' notion that has been propagated within this discourse has come into play as part of the need to reduce public expenditure while drawing more fully on the creativity and ingenuity of citizens. We face the prospect that government urban renewal policies imply a systemic 'downloading' of welfare and development responsibilities from central government to local authorities and neighbourhoods (Aylett, 2010). Public sector spending was cut by £9bn in the 2009 UK Government budget and a minimum 10% cut in public spending in 2010 was instigated. Further 'downloading' of service delivery is undoubtedly anticipated given the size of the planned deficit reduction in the UK which will involve increased co-option of voluntary sector organisations, not-for-profit companies, charities and community groups. This new austerity regime has huge implications for already precarious and deprived communities and may herald a return to the survival of the fittest approach to area regeneration. A drastic further shift away from principles such as redistribution, social equality and justice have serious implications for the poorest in our cities. Maybe the UK government's talk of 'big society' can be turned into a workable option after the failure, in turn, of 'big government' and 'big market'? (see Blond, 2010)

Many community-based and, what might be identified as, design activist initiatives exist which have shown that it is possible to use innovative approaches to generate significant improvements. These include: the Goodwin Development Trust which was set up as a charitable organisation in 1994 by residents of the Thornton Estate in Hull to improve their quality of life and the services available on their estate; Glasgow 2020 Vision a project that developed a future vision for Glasgow that was not constrained by institutional interests; Imagine Chicago, a non-profit organization in existence since 1992 which aims to cultivate 'hope and civic engagement in a variety of cross cultural and

intergenerational initiatives, projects and programs' (Imagine Chicago website) and began by a city-wide Appreciative Enquiry process; Transition Towns, originating in Totnes, UK, which provides methods for building community resilience for a post-carbon future; the Eldonians in Liverpool who have turned a housing estate around using a housing co-operative model; Coin Street Community Builders founded in 1977 to resist a large-scale hotel and office development that would have had a major negative impact on this small London community; the BalanCity Project, an urban renewal project that works with Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD); Biz-Fizz, an approach developed jointly by New Economics Foundation (NEF) and the Civic Trust in 2001 to provide business support to people in communities experiencing economic disadvantage, and challenge the misconception that there is a lack of entrepreneurs and enterprising ideas in these communities. Many of these innovative experiments seem to have occurred in spite of the state rather than via its mechanisms.

At this point it is worth sketching in my own activity as a design activist practitioner. The new landscape of peak oil, climate change and of the crisis of many financialisation and property initiatives, and with it of the naïve belief in continuous growth model, requires new understandings and an ability to think laterally and holistically (Bauman 2008). This condition gave rise to the emergence of a strong radical movement in the Leeds, UK, under the slogan of 'Leeds. Love It. Share It', a play on the official Leeds brand, 'Leeds Live It. Love It'. This initiative was made up of individuals and groups, networking creative practitioners, academics and activists, recognising the redundancy or, even, the absence of any strident city policies in the face of the three pressures of social inequality, environmental change and economic recession. Its steering group currently comprises Irena Bauman (Bauman Lyons Architects), Sue Ball (Media And Arts Partnerships), Rachael Unsworth and Paul Chatterton (School of Geography, Leeds University), Andy Edwards (independent graphic designer), Andy Goldring (Permaculture Association) and myself. As such it comprised an alliance of creative practitioners and members of the academic community.

Leeds Love It Share It is now a Community Interest Company (a designation that makes it 'not for profit' while giving it company status, and thus the ability to undertake consultancy work). It has explored how inner cities can adapt and respond to these rapidly changing times in innovative new ways. Funded to the tune of about £80000 by the Regional Development Agency, Yorkshire Forward, and £10000 from the city council's Local Enterprise Generation Initiative, the project looked at how tools for resilience, adaptability and sustainability could be designed and implemented in inner suburban areas of Leeds.

The pilot study was the inner suburb of Richmond Hill, chosen because it is within the 'Rim' of Leeds where

baseline research has been undertaken. This established key findings and the potential for further detailed research. The area was also chosen as it contains communities that fell within the lowest 3% of Super Output Areas (SOAs) nationally (classification has since changed but it still acts as a good indicator). This demonstrates that these communities are relatively deprived and or in a state of transition.

social institutions – eg. sporting or leisure clubs, faith groups, support groups;

green space use – eg. gardens, allotments, left-over spaces, derelict space;

grey economy – eg. informal childcare networks, vehicle repair activities.

The primary focus was in one pilot study area to look at how a better understanding of each theme, and their inter-relationships, can contribute to more sustainable and ethical development.

By doing this it was hoped that attention is drawn to the resources that are available but invariably overlooked in these areas and that provide important infrastructures for the sustainability of these communities. It brings this, largely shadow, rim back into the wider picture of the city. It also begins to counter the notion that urban regeneration can take place from the centre outwards by helping to develop resilience of localities. It is intended that this action is both scaled up and down. The city's Richmond Hill area provides a scenario to test mapping processes and its forms of representation. This prototyping will then contribute to a toolbox which can then be rolled out into other areas of the inner suburbs. At the same time, it is expected that this toolbox can be used and adapted by communities themselves, thus scaling the process down and allowing for greater participation and less concentration in the hands of 'experts'.

Partners included:

Re'New (neighbourhood renewal agency)

Leeds Enterprise Generation Initiative

East and South East Leeds Regeneration

Leeds City Council (Director of Regeneration)

Yorkshire Forward (Economic Inclusion and Renaissance Units)

Here, then, within the 'Margins within the City' project, Leeds Love It Share It is engaged in a number of the features discussed in both the 'uploading' and 'downloading' elements of the relationship of design to the public sector. In the first instance, it engages with the fragmented, agentified qualities of public sector service delivery, acting as an interlocutor between them. It looks for ways of combining private, commercial, voluntary sector and citizen interests. In so doing it also seeks to capitalise on untapped resources and potential relationships.

CONCLUSION

In all of the above cited examples, including the 'Margins within the City' project, there is a design element. Broadly, implied in them is a willingness to re- envision, to reconstitute social relations and experience through the planning and establishment of material and non-material community assets. Theoretically, at least, we might also point up the processual elements in these examples that resonate with design thinking in general and service design more specifically. In the first instance, close attention is paid to end-user needs and practice. Non-mainstream actions that provide innovations are identified. Solutions are prototyped and tested *in situ*. Experts and lay-people enter into a longer-term relationship where adjustments and maintenance interventions are made beyond the point of implementation.

To repeat, the design activist is working between the uploading and downloading dynamics. This is therefore distinct from the historical notion of the design activist as 'refusnik' of a larger state or corporate system. Instead, the design activist is, to varying levels, engaged *with* dominant ideological programmes by dint of working with public sector interests. In terms of uploading, then, s/he is acting as the broker between disparate entities. The context of agentification, as already indicated, gives way to a fragmentation of service-providers. We have already seen how this provides brut opportunities for commercial designers. But the design activist may be involved in piecing together various interests. In the case of 'Margins within the City' project, we worked between regional development agency strategists, city council planners, neighbourhood renewal teams as well as more 'on-the-ground' actors such as voluntary groups, businesses, neighbourhood fora, religious organisations and health promotion teams.

The kind of design activism that is central to this paper suggests an historical modification. All those historical examples cited – from William Morris to Superstudio – advocated a connection between the way that design was conceived and how this implied particular ways of thinking, doing and acting. The radical Italian groups of the 1970s most explicitly open up the notion of design as being concerned with networks and relationality. Their aspiration toward a frictionless environment wherein people are less encumbered by the materiality of consumer culture and instead, seek meaningful and productive social relationships points clearly in the direction of the more pragmatic theories and approaches developed by the likes of Ezio Manzini and John Thackara. However, those 1970s 'anti-designers' were wrapped up in the anti-state and anti-capitalist movements of their era.

Certain practices of design activism are, however, more closely implicated in the political economies of the public sector than their forebearers. Ultimately, designers have to make a living, no matter how humble.

The changes in public sector practices offer up new opportunities for those designers with an activist impetus. At base level, this may be in the forming of artefacts, in giving value to things. But they may also be engaged in looking for and articulating new sources of value. Various other sorts of capital may be investigated and demonstrated by the designer such as social capital, knowledge capital or land assets. While some historical examples of design activism might have tended toward garnering these and their relational fit to create an alternative society (eg. the Waldenesque hippy commune), the kind of design activism that is featured in this paper critically takes itself closer to systems of governance and economy.

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