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Keeping the System Going: Social Design and the Reproduction of Inequalities in Neoliberal Times *Design Issues*

Guy Julier and Lucy Kimbell

27 May 2018

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, it has become increasingly common to find people trained in product, user experience or service design involved in designing systems and configurations to achieve social or policy goals.¹ This expansion of design practices has been accompanied by growing awareness of the challenges resulting from designers tackling social issues, or from design methods being used to address policy challenges.²

While such designing aims to effect social changes, few, if any, of these professionals explicitly claim to engage with inequalities. Such a claim would be a political one – a recognition of design as a *bona fide* conduit for confronting, exposing and ameliorating inequalities as well as being a recognition of their structural and ideological causes. If there is a version of social design that does this, we take this to overlap with design activism, whose quest for political agency is clearer.³ However, at the same time we recognize that practitioners within social design have a sense of agency. Social design provides a space to engage their core ethical values.⁴ The themes that they address -- such as homelessness, healthcare, education or unemployment -- involve tackling symptoms of inequalities, if not their causes.

To tackle inequalities head on through social design is a big, if not impossible, ask in these neoliberal times. The case of a link between the neoliberal economic systems that have coursed around the world since the 1980s, and inequalities is incontrovertible. Countless studies demonstrate not only economic but also legal, property, educational, racial/ethnic, health and wellbeing inequalities as the result of financialist neoliberal modes.⁵ Put more generally, the domination of rentier

¹ Dung-Sheng Chen, Lu-Lin Cheng, Caroline Hummels and Ilpo Koskinen, "Social Design: An introduction," *International Journal of Design* 10, no. 1 (2016): 1-5.

² Otto von Busch, and Karl Palmås, "Social Means Do Not Justify Corruptible Ends: A Realist Perspective of Social Innovation and Design," *She Ji*, 2 no. 4 (2016): 275-287; Ahmed Ansari, "Politics and Method", *Modes of Criticism*, 2016, <http://modesofcriticism.org/politics-method/> accessed 15 January 2018.

³ Thomas, Markussen, "The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism: Enacting Design Between Art and Politics." *Design Issues* 29, no. 1 (2013): 38-50.

⁴ Jesper Christensen and Laura Bunt, *Innovation in Policy: Allowing for Creativity, Social Complexity and Uncertainty in Public Governance*. (London: Nesta, 2012).

⁵ e.g. Joe T. Darden, and Elvin Wyly, "Cartographic Editorial—Mapping the Racial/Ethnic Topography of Subprime Inequality in Urban America." *Urban Geography* 31, no. 4 (2010): 425-433; Richard Peet, "Inequality, Crisis and Austerity in Finance Capitalism." *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 4, no. 3

capitalism within neoliberal modes of production and consumption is, by necessity, dependent on inequalities.⁶ Financialization requires the on-going use of labor in all its monetary and non-monetary forms, as well as social and natural capital, in ways that directly and indirectly produce inequalities.⁷ In order for finance to thrive, it has to get others to work on its behalf.

Indeed, one might go further to view social design – particularly in its professionalized, consultant modes – to have benefitted from the spaces that are opened up by austerity measures that have resulted in welfare budget cuts in many countries. Since the 1980s, the exponential growth of economic inequalities has been exacerbated by the steady retreat of the ‘safety net’ of the state as a device for addressing inequality issues.⁸ In addition, the ‘aftershock’ of the economic crisis of 2008 made state responses to long-term challenges such as ageing populations and climate change that much harder as they prioritized dealing with government indebtedness.⁹ Nonetheless, for many states, maintaining health and wellbeing and, at least, ensuring a modicum of equality is still seen as necessary to the functioning of their economic systems.¹⁰ Capitalism still requires some healthy, intelligent and motivated citizens.

This tension between austerity economics and addressing inequalities has led to a ‘downloading’ of state responsibility for welfare, and for tackling inequalities to the

(2011): 383-399; Tim Jackson “The Post-Growth Challenge: Secular Stagnation, Inequality and the Limits to Growth”, CUSP Working Paper No 12. (Guildford: University of Surrey, 2018).

⁶ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, (London: Belknap Press, 2014)

⁷ Jacob Assa, "Financialization and its consequences: the OECD Experience." *Finance Research* 1, no. 1 (2012): 35-39.; Ken-Hou Lin, and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey. "Financialization and US income inequality, 1970–2008." *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 5 (2013): 1284-1329; Joanna Boehnert, "The Green Economy: Reconceptualizing the Natural Commons as Natural Capital." *Environmental Communication* 10, no. 4 (2016): 395-417.

⁸ Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World economy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁹ Patrick Diamond and Roger Liddle, "Aftershock: The Post-crisis Social Investment Welfare State in Europe." *Towards a Social Investment Welfare State? Ideas, Policies and Challenges* (2012): 285-308.

¹⁰ Yvonne Hartman, "In Bed with the Enemy: Some ideas on the Connections Between Neoliberalism and the Welfare State." *Current Sociology* 53, no. 1 (2005): 57-73.

more localized settings of cities, communities and citizens.¹¹ This change of scale also entails a breaking of the social contract of the (Keynesian) welfare state that was previously held at national level, introducing instead, a different locus of experimentalism in policy and implementation.¹² Rather than being held at the regulated, state-level of accountability, in neoliberal governance tackling inequalities becomes the responsibility of changing and multifarious collections of local government departments, NGOs, community organisations and other entities.¹³

In this process of downloading, it is not surprising to find design activities fashioning local responses to austerity and problem-solving. They play the role not just of addressing social challenges, but, additionally, of producing cost savings for hard-pressed municipalities or welfare organizations. In response to the challenges of falling welfare budgets, therefore, social design consultancies have positioned themselves in developing innovative ways of re-structuring state-citizen relationships while promising costs savings.¹⁴

Notwithstanding this latter motive, and to strike a more positive note, social designers might make and, indeed, have made, several other contributions. The new, more localized organizational spaces of experimentation may be read also as a shift to so-called 'networked governance' in which governmental structures such as municipalities work within networks of partnership, cooperation and collaboration between entities of government, outsourced service providers, organisations of civil society and citizens themselves. There is an expectation of a move from centralized, professionally-dominated bureaucracies to more client- or citizen-oriented approaches.¹⁵

In this environment, and in particular in addressing inequalities and the breadth in which these are manifested, social designers may, for instance, undertake roles in:

¹¹ Betsy Donald, Amy Glasmeier, Mia Gray, and Linda Lobao, "Austerity in the City: Economic Crisis and Urban Service Decline?" *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 2014, no. 7, 3–15.

¹² Jamie Peck, "Political Economies of Scale: Fast Policy, Interscalar Relations, and Neoliberal workfare." *Economic Geography* 78, no. 3 (2002): 331-360; Erik Swyngedouw, Erik. "Governance Innovation and the Citizen: the Janus Face of Governance-beyond-the-state." *Urban Studies* 42, no. 11 (2005): 1991-2006.

¹³ Dexter Whitfield, *Public Services or Corporate Welfare: Rethinking the nation state in the global economy*. (London: Pluto Press. 2001)

¹⁴ Guy Julier, "Consultant social design, austerity and citizenry," *City* 21, no. 6 (2017): 813-821.

¹⁵ Frank Fischer, "Participatory governance as deliberative empowerment: The cultural politics of discursive space." *The American review of public administration* 36, no. 1 (2006): 19-40.

- enabling public servants and other actors to gain new perspectives on ways of co-producing public services; for example, working closely with a municipality, residents and other stakeholders to develop an upcycling station as a co-produced public service for handling and reducing waste in Sweden;¹⁶
- recognizing the cultural and technological specificities of actors and devices within a setting; for example, running several workshops with device-centred creative tasks to understand the situatedness of people involved a handcraft community in Cambodia;¹⁷
- co-designing new possibilities of resource use and new systems and products to leverage pre-existing resources and social relationships; for example, organizing a multi-stakeholder collaboration to generate alternative scenarios for eating sustainably and assessing the desirability of these.¹⁸

Meanwhile, within the growth of social design, social innovation and related fields, considerations of method and approach in the field and in education have been explored.¹⁹ And yet, the enormity and strength of the structural conditions that give rise to the problems that they purport to address are only briefly considered in these accounts. The organisation of budgets, processes of implementation within policy cycles or the valorisation of impact are all everyday questions that relate, ultimately, to neoliberal modes of governance. Furthermore, the entanglement of social design with these modes and the actual ways through which they shape social designers' practices require discussion here.

One way of looking at social design follows a distinction between 'market' and 'social' design.²⁰ Others have argued that design can only ever be *responsive* to social situations, rather than having responsibility for changing them, and should aim to

¹⁶ Anna Seravalli, Mette Agger Eriksen and Per-Anders Hillgren, "Co-design in co-production processes: Jointly articulating and appropriating infrastructuring and commoning with civil servants," *CoDesign* 13, no. 3, (2017): 187-201, DOI: 10.1080/15710882.2017.1355004

¹⁷ Lina Kang. "Social design as a creative device in developing countries: The case of a handcraft pottery community in Cambodia." *International Journal of Design* 10, no. 3, (2016): 65-74.

¹⁸ Anna R. Davies, "Food Futures: Co-designing Sustainable Eating Practices for 2050." *EuroChoices* 12, no. 2 (2013): 4-11.

¹⁹ e.g. Ezio Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*. (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015); Matthew W. Easterday, Elizabeth M. Gerber and Daniel G. Rees Lewis, "Social Innovation Networks: A New Approach to Social Design Education and Impact." *Design Issues*, Spring 34, no. 2, (2018): 64-76

²⁰ Victor Margolin and Sylvia Margolin, "A 'Social Model' of Design: Issues of Practice and Research." *Design Issues* 18, no. 4 (2002): 24-30.

produce 'good enough' design outcomes²¹. But another perspective highlights the complex entanglements between design cultures and modes of capitalist production. Here design expertise configures and is configured by features such as complex systems of outsourcing and subcontracting or the calculation of social value in monetary terms.²² This perspective suggests that a distinction between 'market' and 'social' design is too simple, when trying to account for contemporary design practices. In these circumstances, we might view social design existing, as a professional identity, relationally to other professional and organisational demands rather than in terms of a clear set of normative positions.²³

There has been recognition in design literatures of the complex social, technological and organizational systems which designers are (re)designing²⁴. However, we question whether professional design practices, as currently configured, are equipped to identify and address the inequalities that will result from such interventions. In the following sections we take a closer look at social design to discuss two reasons for this. First, we review the institutional structures within which social design operates to demonstrate how its precarious status mitigates against the consolidation of a legitimate professional practice. Second, we show how its approach and methods are performed such as to draw the focus of practice away from the problems it seeks to address. These, we conclude, make it difficult for designers to respond to inequalities which are produced through, and sustain, neo-liberal ways of organizing resources. Despite these concerns, however, we identify opportunities that might enable social design practice to live up to its hopes.

Structuring Social Design

As we have already identified, social design has emerged and consolidated since 2008 in response to government policies that ensure the weakening of state functions, particularly in welfare responsibilities. These have taken place in part through outsourcing of services to private companies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They have produced considerable 'pull' in terms of opportunities to practice social design. However, two strands emanating from design and nearby practices have provided some 'push' in this development. One is the overlapping of activist practices such as community action with professional modes

²¹ Adam Thorpe and Lorraine Gamman, "Design with Society: Why Socially Responsive Design is Good Enough," *CoDesign* 7, no. 3-4, (2011): 217-230, DOI: 10.1080/15710882.2011.630477

²² Guy Julier, *Economies of Design* (London: Sage, 2017), chp.8.

²³ David Wang and Ali O. Ilhan, "Holding creativity together: A sociological theory of the design professions." *Design Issues* 25, no. 1 (2009): 5-21.

²⁴ e.g. Pelle Ehn, Elisabet M. Nilsson, and Richard Topgaard. *Making Futures: Marginal Notes on Innovation, Design, and Democracy*. (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014).

of design consultancy. The other is developments in design and management practices including customer experience, data science and social entrepreneurship.²⁵ The genealogy of social design is hybrid as are its practices and locations diverse.

Several professionalized forms of social design are evident. First, small-scale consultancies provide expertise to local, regional and national state functions in specialist areas such as health or social care (e.g. InWithForward, Toronto) or education (e.g. Innovation Unit, London) alongside teams within larger consultancies. Second, organizational units, often in government or government-funded, such as MindLab in Denmark²⁶, TACSI in Australia, Policy Lab in the UK, the Public Policy Lab in New York City or La 27e Région in France, employ design methods in developing solutions to policy issues.²⁷ Third, thinktanks, innovation bodies and foundations such as Nesta (UK), Rockefeller Foundation (US) and MaRS (Canada) advocate and support the dissemination of social design. Often supported through endowments or sponsorship, they use design within social innovation projects, bring professionals together, set agendas and distribute resources such as toolkits.

This variety and hybridity of social design reflects a wider framework of institutional logics in which different design professions exist. Understanding the kinds of expertise that are produced and validated through different organizational practices requires being attentive to professional design's histories and institutional locations. The approach known as institutional theory within organization studies prompts us to identify the contingent relationships and environments that are combined to produce the object of our study, professional social design practice.²⁸

Designers working within different traditions have varying competences, identities, resources and accountabilities. Reviewing the origin stories of industrial design in the US, for instance, Ilhan argues that the former found legitimacy from negotiating between technical and aesthetic competences, as well as between culture and the market place.²⁹ For Ilhan, design disciplines in the US academy were always hybrids,

²⁵ Leah Armstrong, Jocelyn Bailey, Guy Julier, and Lucy Kimbell, "Social design futures: HEI research and the AHRC." (Brighton: University of Brighton, 2014).

²⁶ MindLab closed in May 2018; the other examples were still operating at the time of writing.

²⁷ Michael McGann, Emma Blomkamp, and Jenny Lewis, "The Rise of Public Sector Innovation Labs: Experiments in Design Thinking for Policy", *Policy Sciences* (March 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-018-9315-7>

²⁸ Richard W. Scott, "The Adolescence of Institutional Theory." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 32, no.4, (1987): 493-511; Philip Selznick, "Institutionalism 'old' and 'new'." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41, no.2 (1996): 270-277.

²⁹ Ali O. Ihan, "Growth or Decline? A Longitudinal Analysis of Factors Affecting the Institutional Trajectories of Five Design Disciplines in the United States." *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 2, no. 4 (2017): 300-321.

reliant on interdependencies with architecture, engineering and fine art within an ecosystem of disciplines.³⁰

This hybridity in design contrasts strongly with architecture, which is much more fixed and normative in its disciplinarity. For example, in the UK only people who have been through training approved by the Architects Regulation Board, a statutory body, and who are registered with it, are legally entitled to practice as architects.³¹ Equally, the practice of architecture itself reinforces its disciplinary boundaries and consolidates professional identity and legitimacy. The 'red tape' of practising as an architect – such as liaising with planning officers, consulting with neighborhood stakeholders or fulfilling safety requirements – puts several layers of checks and balances into play. In turn, these provoke investigation and debate into the wider conditions of architecture and the roles that it serves.³²

For designers, the rules of the game are not strongly institutionalized but in flux.³³ Their expertise is not authorized or regulated by statute or by professional bodies, and they are not held accountable in a specific way. There are no statutory bodies determining and regulating what a product, service or social designer is, or what they should know or be able to do. In this situation, a struggle for professional legitimation and recognition exists. The fragmentation of the design industry, its absence of any legalistic frameworks and low participation in its professional bodies constantly mitigate against the levels of investigation and debate as to design's societal functions that architecture enjoys.

The low level of participation by designers in professional bodies is striking. For example, efforts in the UK to create a chartered profession for design, similar to architecture and the engineering professions, resulted in the formation of a body called the Chartered Society of Designers founded in 1976. But without the statutory requirement delineating the scope of the profession and defining its expertise, it has struggled to find agency or, indeed, members. A Design Council survey published found there were 1,593,600 people working in the design economy in the UK in 2014 across all fields including digital, graphic, industrial design and architecture.³⁴ By contrast, membership of the Chartered Society of Designers has averaged around a

³⁰ Andrew Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

³¹ "About ARB". Architects Regulation Board, accessed March 21, 2018, <http://www.arb.org.uk/about-arb/>

³² Erik Sigge, "Architecture's Red Tape: Government Building Construction in Sweden, 1963-1973. The example of the National Board of Public Building, KBS (Kungliga Byggnadsstyrelsen)." PhD diss., KTH Royal Institute of Technology, 2017.

³³ Max Rolfstam, and Jacob Buur, "An Institutional View on User Improvisation and Design," In Wendy Gunn and Jared Donovan, (Eds), *Design and Anthropology*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).

³⁴ Design Council, *The Design Economy. The Value of Design to the UK*. (London: Design Council, 2015).

mere 2,500 since 2000.³⁵ Furthermore, the flattening of expertise – ‘design when everyone designs’, as Manzini puts it – also brings into question the specialist competences of professionals.³⁶

This is not necessarily a weakness in design. Rather, it opens up its possibilities for swift response to changing social, economic and technological conditions, endowing it with flexibility – design constantly re-designing itself. The unfolding invention of new specialisms of design since the 1980s has therefore worked against the establishment of normative professional standards. Each one – be it, for example, leisure design from the 1990s, interaction design from the 2000s, or social design from the 2010s – demands specific knowledge, commercial processes or ethical standards. The hybridity in the origins and formation of social design is typical of the wider design industry, therefore. It is symptomatic of a constant churn within it and entanglement with related specialisms. Thus, social designers may be subjected to the internal limits of their own field where there is little time for the consolidation or testing of thinking and approach. Reflection on political or ethical questions are curtailed by its own emergent qualities.

Social design is shaped and re-shaped not only by the inputs of its related fields but in the terms of the policy landscape, the systems of governance or the economies of welfare provision that are embodied into the array of clients, stakeholders and publics that it is enmeshed with. However, this external environment that it responds to is in a constant state of flux as well. In neoliberal modes of governance, policies are themselves ‘fast’ or ‘agile’ in that they are constantly reactive to emerging challenges that are processed and experimented with in localized contexts rather than as part of the responsibilities of the nation-state.³⁷ The formation of professional and moral authority or legitimacy is challenging for the social designer in this constantly changing context. The next section focuses on how, in practice, this is sometimes established and how this may, in fact, divert attention away from the actual work of addressing inequalities.

Performing Social Design

Let us shift the lens on social design and consider its everyday practices. What do social designers actually do? And how do they appear to engage with social change?

The rise of social design is accompanied by a new material culture of design practice which has come to prominence, populated with Post-it notes, Play-doh models and

³⁵ Leah Armstrong, "Steering a Course Between Professionalism and Commercialism: The Society of Industrial Artists and the Code of Conduct for the Professional Designer 1945–1975." *Journal of Design History* 29, no. 2 (2015): 161-179.

³⁶ Manzini, 2015, op.cit.

³⁷ Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, *Fast Policy: Experimental Statecraft at the Thresholds of Neoliberalism*. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

cardboard models incorporating Lego, string and Blue-tac. As with other organizational 'design thinking', such materials are used by people involved in a project exploring and generating solutions to issues that often go way beyond the bounds of individual products. Traditionally, design has been represented photographically through the reified, finished object, often floating in space, devoid of context of use or the imprint of process. By contrast, images of social design lay emphasis on the messy, unfinished and emergent qualities of doing it. Given that the outcomes of social design are typically not objects, but things such as adjustments to policies or new systems of support whose value is in their use, rather in their physical presence, this shift may not be surprising. However, this new emphasis on the doing of social design hides a danger that lurks in its performance.

In laying out Post-it notes on a wall, questions and solutions emerge very quickly. Methods such as 'customer journey mapping' provide limited accounts of such things as bureaucracies, people, know-how, everyday things and their use, and their configurations. Bottlenecks, misalignments or unnoticed resources are identified. Ameliorations are inserted. And through such processes, participants doing social design may perceive a complex problem differently and get a *feeling* of change. However, real change happens in the slow, tricky and political work of implementation.

This is put succinctly in the following comment by a member of a public-sector innovation lab:

'...it can feel a bit like the same group of people talking to each other about the same ideas, with a bit too much affection for Post-it notes and bunting and with not enough focus on impact.... the real challenge to anyone working in this space is to ensure that at the beginning of a project, you aren't just creating a great piece of work, you're also anticipating how the change is actually going to happen. ... Unless we focus on impact and what that looks like, there's a danger that Lab work just ends up as some really nice Post-it notes on a wall somewhere.'³⁸

Not only do such scenarios provide the illusion of change but they are also employed as part of their own advocacy. The change -- and thus actually addressing issues such as inequalities -- that social design promises is encapsulated and *sealed into* the Post-its and their representation. Reports and social media are redolent with such images. This is not just a case of the Post-its symbolizing processes of social change. Social change gets attached to them. By way of both similarity and contrast, and in the context of social welfare and design in Sweden, Murphy demonstrates how this dynamic works and where associations are semiotically forced around and into

³⁸Sophia Parker, "Lab Notes interview with Sophia Parker, founder of Social Innovation Lab for Kent" (2015) (<http://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/lab-notes-interview-sophia-parker-founder-social-innovation-lab-kent#sthash.7exkK6Hy.dpuf>), accessed 12 December 2015.

objects.³⁹ Meanings of equality or social democracy are inscribed into objects and constantly reproduced through their representation and reproduction in national circuits of culture. Here, we identify a similar dynamic, played out in a different way with different materials and in the design process itself.

In such practices, things are virtual; they are real but not actual.⁴⁰ This means that abstracted accounts of individual behavior or social and economic activity become the accepted model of how things should be, regardless of how they would play out in actuality. The challenges of mediating a project through bureaucracies in relation to current and historical institutional drivers such as new public management, audit culture or digital transformation are played down.

A second difficulty, not unrelated to this notion of virtualism, is in the institutional infrastructures that give voice to design-led social or public innovation. We have noted some organizations, either supported as foundations, through endowments or directly by governments, engaged in developing and promoting social design. There is the danger here that orthodoxies flow like memes through and between these, without critically assessing what is possible or even politically desirable. For example, in a study of design toolkits in Pakistan aimed at non-designers, Ansari claims that they crowd out and suppress local knowledge and thought.⁴¹ He argues that the focus on designing a product or service promoted by powerful actors like foundations can ignore alternative perspectives that challenge assumptions such as about economic growth.

Being 'human-centred', in such 'social' designing, attends to the experiences of users as individualized entities cast adrift from the social, cultural, and political settings within which they have subjectivity and agency. Illustrated outputs of social design such as personas or user journey maps can travel through networks of project partners detached from specificity and grounded actuality. Persons are actual, but personas are virtual. Such virtualism masks the re-production of inequalities by performing change that cannot happen.

This question of virtualism brings the argument back to the structural issues of social design discussed in the last section. Given the unstable professional identity of design and constantly unfolding and changing contexts of its practice, how is the social designer's authority established? And how does this create blockages in engaging with inequality issues?

The performance of being a social designer through toolkits, Post-it layouts and so on also embeds a level of authority in the precarious professional context. Straightforwardly, these impose an image of expert knowledge that becomes social

³⁹ Keith Murphy, "A Cultural Geometry: Designing Political Things in Sweden." *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 1 (2013): 118-131.

⁴⁰ James G. Carrier and Daniel Miller, *Virtualism: a New Political Economy*. (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

⁴¹ Ansari, 2016, op.cit.

designers' frontline asset. This validates an image of professionalism, attempting to give it legitimacy. However, it also provides a kind of 'explicit meta-language' that negotiates and even bargains for a level of value and recognition.⁴²

This arises, in particular, where the value or impact of the intervention is opaque – such as the experimentalism of social design in the context of inequalities. Thus, this virtualism undertakes two complimentary functions. One is in appearing to bind the design process to a wider identity of professional standards – all be this a very new one and one that is under constant reconfiguration at that. The other is in claiming an epistemological territory over the design context to hand (or, more prosaically, impressing the client through the abstraction of the context and its respective issues into a neater visual framework).

Discussion

We have argued that as currently configured, social design practice is destined not to tackle the causes and consequences of inequalities, even while being enrolled in social and policy change-making. We noted aspects of the neoliberal condition such as precarity and the institutional location of social design constrain the potential for significant change. We also argued the everyday practices of social design play out a performative mode of innovation with constant adjustments to current systems that are virtual, not actual. Even if an individual designer is motivated to challenge inequality and has some agency as a consultant to do so, the logic of the institution they are part of serves to reproduce inequalities. These result from the location of professional design operating in service mode within neoliberalism; the lack of developed accountability devices and processes to govern practice in relation to social issues; the limited sense of being a public profession; material practices that dealing with the virtual, not the actual; and limited spaces for reflexivity. There are potential ways forward, however.

First, opportunities emerge from critically examining these locations and characteristics to develop a reflexive professional practice with associated devices, processes and infrastructures to govern and make accountable professions doing social design in relation to their publics. Turning a critical lens on the conditions in which design professions and competences have emerged historically and geographically will aid in understand the potential for, and limits of, social design practice being used to address inequalities. Calls for research-led design education informed by a re-invigorated design studies⁴³ and for a political agenda to design for

⁴² Webb Keane, "Market, Materiality and Moral Metalanguage." *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 1 (2008): 27-42.

⁴³ Cameron Tonkinwise, "Design Studies—What is it Good For?," *Design and Culture* 6, no. 1, (2015): 5-43, DOI: [10.2752/175470814X13823675225036](https://doi.org/10.2752/175470814X13823675225036)

transitions to sustainable futures⁴⁴ are examples of related agendas. Developing an institutional critique of social design practice, and recognizing the embeddedness of design practices in neo-liberal systems, will enable careful analysis of the conditions of inequalities, and their related social and policy challenges, that are amenable to being addressed through social designing. Such insights can inform devices, processes and structures through which social design can be developed and governed to become a reflexive profession and body of knowledge.

Second, there are opportunities to work in ways other than the conventional client-designer dyad (whether internal service provider or external consultant) associated with industrial, product and digital design. Within social designing, designers don't have to have a stake (merely) as designers; they can be public servants, politicians, employed within public services, participants in movements, as well as citizens, whose stakes in actualities precede and continue after a change project. While each of these roles and identities brings its own challenges in relation to the potential for understanding and addressing inequalities, they all require having an embodied, knowing professional agency within and across institutions. It will be useful to recognize the diverse spatialities and temporalities at play in the outcomes of designing and the need to examine how responsibilities for these are identified, negotiated and assessed.

Third, there are opportunities to construct inventive methods to bring the structuring of inequalities into view, replacing virtualism with actualism.⁴⁵ Instead of user journey maps that communicate experiences, there might be devices to reveal and intervene into how inequalities are constituted and the discourses and institutional logics involved in reproducing them.

In short, we have argued that neoliberalism requires inequalities, and that social design's institutional location limits its capacity to address this. But, we hope, social design *can* tackle inequalities. However in order to do so requires recognizing and changing how this emerging profession is structured and performed.

⁴⁴ Terry Irwin, "Transition Design: A Proposal for a New Area of Design Practice, Study, and Research, Design and Culture," *Design and Culture* 7, no. 2, (2015): 229-246, doi: 10.1080/17547075.2015.1051829

⁴⁵ Celia Lury, and Nina Wakeford, (Eds.), *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); Noortje Marres, Michael Guggenheim and Alex Wilkie, (Eds), *Inventive Social Research*. (London: Mattering Press, forthcoming).

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