



## What Do Designers Have to Offer When Facing Societal Challenges?

**Keywords:** design for social innovation; design objects; designers role; societal challenges

A conversation held at DRS2016  
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This document is conversation proposal and documentation in one.

### Catalysts

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### Introduction

Objects, artefacts, things. All these words are part of design, sometimes as synonyms, sometimes with different meanings. Since the establishment of design schools, designers have been trained to create new or improve existing products; we are good at designing these objects, artefacts and things. However, when we as designers involve ourselves in societal challenges, when we engage in designing for social innovation, how can we use our expertise of designing objects? In recent years, (participatory) design scholars have argued that the design community's fundamental challenge is to move from designing objects to designing Things (Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren, 2012) and that participatory design is particularly suited to renounce the designer's obsession with objects in favour of Things



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(Binder et al, 2015). These Things are defined as ‘socio-material assemblies’, characterised by Latour (1999) as collectives of humans and non-humans.

The shift away from designing objects to designing Things transforms design from being outcome-oriented to being process-oriented instead. However, what remains of our expertise on designing objects? Shifting to the process-oriented Thinging approach, design objects become non-human actors, but what is the role and purpose of the objects we design:

- What value do designers and their design objects (according to the DRS community) have to offer in addressing societal challenges?

This main research question was addressed in the conversation through interactive case study reviews, introduced by the catalysts, using bolt propositions. Participants were asked to take position on these propositions in order to address some key characteristics around designing for social innovation. These characteristics are captured in four sub-questions:

1. Engagement of designers: What is the wanted level of attendance and commitment of designers? Should we be observing, supporting, facilitating, provoking, ...?
2. Objects/artefacts/things designed: What do we still consider a design object – can for example a workshop be a design object? What is the value of these design objects in designing for social innovation?
3. (long term) Impact of the design involvement: What happens when we leave the social innovation arena? What is the risk of the situation reverting or worse? How could we prevent this?
4. Responsibility of the designer: What is the responsibility of designers when facing societal challenges? Should they intervene in challenges that go beyond their core expertise? Should we take (joint) ownership of the challenge?

## **Session set-up**

The session started with a general introduction to designing for social innovation. Next, the four catalysts each shortly discussed a specific case which they were involved in. After each case, a statement related to one of the sub-questions was presented. For each statement, four potential perspectives were predefined. These perspectives were formulated in a provocative and often contradictory way in order to stimulate debate. Moreover, each perspective was assigned a colour code. To actively involve the participants in the conversation, the participants were asked to literally take a position on the statement by moving to the corner of the room that represented the colour/perspective they agreed with (or most agreed with). Subsequently, participants were invited to elaborate on their choice and engage in the conversation on this topic.

For the analysis of the sessions, 360 degrees photographs were taken once the participants had chosen their position on each statement. The photos were used to establish the percentage of participants for each perspective on each statement. In addition, the entire conversation session was recorded for further analysis to understand why people had chosen their position on the statement. The most enlightening and remarkable quotes mentioned for each statement are included in the conversation results section.



*Figure 1. Start of the conversation*

## **The conversation results**

### **Role of the designer**

After Mascha van der Voort introduced the focus and set-up of the conversation, Thomas Binder introduced a case of collaborative design between senior citizens and the municipality of Copenhagen on how the municipality may support seniors in forming informal networks for peer support. The designers staged 'design laboratories' that 'bracketed off' conventional categories of 'elderly care' and 'health promotion' and instead invoked open rehearsals of authorised citizenship in partnership with municipal officers around playful work-out in public parks. After illustrating how the designers envisioned infrastructures, staged collaborative encounters and took part in activities together with the senior citizens, Thomas posed question: 'Who is the designer?' Four perspectives were provided to the participants: (1) the advocate; (2) the facilitator; (3) the provocative; and (4)

the maker. In total, 36 persons participated in the conversation expressing their perspective by literally taking position in the corners of the room. Table 1 presents the distribution of perspectives regarding the role of the designers.

Table 1. Spread on the first proposition

Who is the designer?	
The Advocate	11%
The Facilitator	33%
The Provocateur	22%
The Maker	11%
Other	22%

Overall, it can be concluded that the expressed opinions were rather varied. 33% of the participants considered ‘facilitation’ to be the main role of the designer. Arguments given for this choice included *‘... the role of facilitator combines parts of the other roles; you can facilitate through making things, by bringing user understanding into collaborative sessions and you can also facilitate through provocation. You are actually doing this very well by dividing the room in this particular way.’* Another 22% indicated that the main contribution of designers would be in the form of ‘provocateur’. They stated that *‘... the provocateur is one of the most distinctive and unique roles a designer can take. Facilitation and making can be performed by others.’* A non-designer opposed by replying: *‘Designers can formulated something in material fashion that other people cannot.’* Four participants considered the designer to be the ‘maker’.

Regarding the role as ‘advocate’, the participants were not unanimous. One participant related to this perspective as *‘... designers should advocate their own, unique profession’*. Another participant in the advocate corner fully opposed this view, while still stressing the role of the designer to be ‘advocate’, but as advocate of the immense amount of knowledge available in other professionals, i.e. *‘... to help them scale that up and make it more visible and powerful, beyond the very personal approach people take. Therefore advocate their knowledge’*. Salient outcome was that 22% of the participants did not want or were unable to choose one of the proposed perspectives. These participants chose naturally to remain standing in the centre of the room. For the catalysts, this was promising and affirmative behaviour as we had discussed beforehand whether we should present this option explicitly. Motivation brought forward by participants not choosing a perspective is captured in the statement that they wanted *‘... to lose the term “role” and see it as a “lens”.’*



*Figure 2. Participants taking position on one of the statements*

### **Role of design objects in collaboration**

The second part of the conversation focused on the objects/artefacts/things designed. What do we still consider a design object and what is the value of these design objects in designing for social innovation? To enhance the conversation, Jacob Buur presented a case regarding a project making sustainable energy sources available to de-miners in Africa. This project asked for redevelopment of the whole system and way of working of the de-miners. A true understanding of the local circumstances was needed as well as finding means to bridge the gap between Europe and Africa, geographically and culturally. This case discussion led to the statement ‘when do design objects foster collaboration?’ Table 2 provides an overview of the four perspectives proposed as well as the percentage of participants that related to each of the perspectives.

Table 2. Spread on the second proposition

<b>When do design objects foster collaboration?</b>	
Attractive aesthetic design is crucial for acceptance	11%
What people co-create themselves	39%
Collaborative objects are highly overrated, discussion is actually better	8%
People's own materials to create ownership	36%
Other	6%

Only three participants choose the most provocative perspective stating that collaborative objects are highly overrated and discussion is actually better. One explained that *'... in the case, the objects shown are rather symbolical in nature, they represent things. It is not necessarily said that if you represent things with tangible objects that this really would help the conversation go along. So, I am actually for strong embodied conversations and very tangible stuff, but they should be really meaningful and not in an artificial way.'* Someone else added that *'... it is the work done around objects, not the objects itself.'*

With respect to the proposition that the use of people's own materials would create ownership, participants indicated that: *'It is important to consider what people can already offer themselves. This avoids being too radical [in your solution].'* Moreover, a participant added that *'what a person brings does not have to be a material contribution, it could be a story. But if that gets reflected in later stages of the process, then I believe that will have a strong relationship to the ownership or relationship a person has to the outcome.'* 'Creating ownership' was also the main motivation expressed by the participants who related to the perspective that objects that people co-created themselves foster collaboration. Overall creating a sense of ownership, either by means of co-creation or use of own materials is considered the main contribution design objects can have in fostering collaboration.

Related to the perspective that attractive aesthetic design is crucial for acceptance, participants expressed that *'aesthetics is underrated. If something does not look interesting in some way, people will not use it.'* More reflectively, it was noted that *'... it depends also on the context within which you work. There is a strong cultural aspect.'* This was reformulated in: *'It should be aesthetic to the stakeholders at hand.'*

As a final remark, it was stressed by one of the participants that: *'The making process itself generates a lot of knowledge as we know, and I think that it is a crucial thing that comes with the co-creation process and ownership; that it stimulates this other way of thinking that is already embodied in the objects or comes with the objects.'*

### Impact of design involvement

Per Linde proceeded by introducing the third case; a lengthy process of co-design with youths, aiming to address empowering aspects of social inclusion and promoting the youths as active citizens in relation to urban local societal challenges in Malmö. The case concerned how the research network grows as an emergent assembly around the design of collaborative technologies. In particular, he discussed how role of design can act as a way of building up a networked discourse around the issue of ‘being heard and seen’ in the city. A central theme addressed the project structure of research and related to ‘what happens when we leave’ and how we as researchers can achieve impact in relation to overarching societal challenges after the projects are finalised. In the context of (long term) impact of the design involvement, Per introduced four perspective regarding how designers can contribute to societal challenges. Table 3 shows the perspectives and the spread of the participants over these.

Table 3. Spread on the third proposition

<b>In anticipation of designers leaving the social innovation arena, we should</b>	
1. Build up long-term relationships beyond singular projects	26%
2. For each project leave an operative piece of knowledge behind	16%
3. Set up complementary stakeholder networks, include policy makers and strive for new alliances	32%
4. Not have complete consensus as goal, uplifting tensions can be constructive	19%
5. Other	6%

Overall, quite an even spread of the participants over the four statements can be seen. 32% of the participants took their position in the corner on setting up complementary stakeholder networks. Arguments that were put forward by participants taking this position were that design activities in regard to societal challenges are much more on-going and dynamic. As one of the participants mentioned: *‘There is never a point where you actually leave something behind because you are always building relationships and that knowledge you build in that instant then feeds into another one, it is actually much more entangled.’* Similarly, a participant pointed out that: *‘If you are very immersed in an environment, you become very connected to the people there and although you may leave, you go back and you are feeding people in there and vice versa.’* 26% of the participants instead chose the corner on building up long-term relationships beyond singular projects. Here, participants mostly pointed out that designers and design researchers are bound to project durations,

but these might simply be too short, even when considering the duration of a PhD project. Therefore, participants in this corner advocated that we should look beyond a single project and build long lasting relationships. One of the participants captured this view by stating that: *'You are saying a PhD is too short, but that is actually the longest duration we have and if three years is too short than I think we need to do things more than once.'* Fewer participants, 16%, took position in the corner that proclaimed that we should leave an operative piece of knowledge behind in each project. Participants choosing this perspective put forward that there should always be some knowledge left behind for the internal stakeholders or some way to make sure the project can be continued when the designer or design researcher leaves. A participant summarised this view by stating: *'In the end, there has to be something where the people who are concerned can benefit from, that they are not left behind without any benefit.'* 19% of the participants chose the corner stating that (complete) consensus does not have to be a goal. Here, participants advocated that contest can make voices heard which previously were not heard and that it does not necessarily have to be the goal to reach consensus before leaving. One participant stated on this topic that: *'I think that the opportunity for designers to explore voices that do not always get heard or work with people to find ways to make those voices be heard differently is really a current challenge.'* 6% of the participants did not choose a corner and instead took position in the middle of the room. From their perspective, the four corners all highlight important aspects or, as a participant stated, *'a prioritisation of different factors that all have a role'*. Thus, their argumentation for not joining a corner was that these aspects or prioritisations should not be separated.



Figure 3. Participants discussing their view on one of the statements



### Responsibility of the designer

Mascha van der Voort introduced a case around the gas extraction in the Dutch province of Groningen. This gas extraction is very beneficial for the entire Dutch economy, but has also caused earthquakes to appear in the region; an effect felt and feared by the Groningen citizens. Designers took on a mediating role to try to bridge a gap between the Groningen citizens and both the national government and the gas extraction company caused by feelings of distrust and injustice. In the case, designers developed a physical, typical Dutch wall and added earthquake cracks where Groningen citizens could leave their messages (suggestions, concerns, complaints) for the powerful strangers in based on the metaphor of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. These messages were subsequently categorised on similar subjects, which were posted on a Facebook page and forwarded to the relevant powerful strangers. Mascha discussed how bringing the designed wall to Groningen towns was very successful and how it made the citizens feel heard. However, after the posting and forwarding the messages, the project ended and this raised the question whether or not the designers were responsible for continuing the project or if they had a responsibility to close it in some form or way. Mascha therefore raised the question: ‘What is the responsibility of designers when facing societal challenges?’ Table 4 provides an overview of the four perspectives proposed on this question and shows the percentage of participants that related to each of these perspectives.

Table 4. Spread on the fourth proposition

What is the responsibility of designers when facing societal challenges?	
1. Challenges or debates that cannot somehow be given closure (come with solution or ensure it is followed up) should not be intervened with	11%
2. Designers are there to enrich the debate, regardless of the result	39%
3. Designers should always strive for consensus at the end of a design intervention	11%
4. Solving or following up on a design intervention is the responsibility of the owners of the challenge	4%
5. Other	36%

On the question raised, the participants spread less evenly than in the previous propositions. Most of the participants either joined the corner that related to designers enrich the debate or did not choose a corner. 36% of the participants did not choose a corner for a variety of reasons. Firstly, a participant mentioned that *‘It is an illusion that you can say beforehand that you either can or cannot give closure to it. [...] Sometimes you find yourself in a situation*

*that you have to take responsibility.*' Apart from not being able to state beforehand what is or is not the designer's responsibility, participants questioned whether or not the designer is responsible on his or her own, or as a participant pointed out: *'this is a distributed responsibility of the stakeholders. There is no owner of the challenge.'* The discussion continued on if and for what the designer is then responsible. Participants pointed out that the designer should establish success factors at the start of the project with all stakeholders and the designer is then responsible for reaching these factors. However, a participant pointed out that *'success factors turn it into an instrumental exercise rather than, I would say, frame the role that designers are going to take within that challenge.'* In the end, the conclusion of this discussion was summarised by a participant by stating: *'Be conscious and reflective of that role rather than assume any number of those roles at the beginning.'* 39% of the participants took position in the corner on designers enriching the debate. The main motivation mentioned by the participants related to not making a community reliant on the designer since societal challenges are on-going, designers should be able to leave the arena at some point. A participant summarised this view by stating: *'So, I see myself coming in, making some interventions of some sort that can be a provocation, that can make them think and then I slowly evaporate again and they continue whatever they already had.'* Fewer participants, 11%, chose the corner on providing closure. Here, participants motivated their position based on fact that *'in certain kinds of projects, closure is actually really important.'* The same participant continued that: *'I mean it will come to an end eventually, so either you need to have some exit strategy or be able to round it off.'* Another 11% of the participants chose the corner on the need to strive for consensus. Here, participants pointed out that *'the role of designers should be at least to try and make some synthesis and produce something [...] you need at least to try and make everybody happy, even if it is a dream.'* The least participants, 4%, chose the corner which proposed that the solving or following up on a design intervention is the responsibility of the owners of the challenge. The participants in this corner motivated their choice by the fact that *'designers have a role in contributing in the empowerment of people, but people have to do it themselves.'*

### **Concluding remarks**

In the conversation the role of the designers and artefacts as well as the long term impact of design and the responsibility of the designer when facing societal challenges were discussed. An enthusiastic and significant group of 36 DRS conference participants actively involved themselves in the conversation. This resulted in lively and passionate debates regarding the four statements presented. The views of the role, approach and responsibility by the designer when facing societal challenges turned out to be diverse.

With regard to all statements, there was a group of participants that did not choose any of the proposed perspectives and remained a central position in the room on each statement. Motivation was in most cases that it would depend on the specific case or circumstances and

in particular the phase of the project at hand what role and approach by the designer would be most beneficial. Another motivation mentioned for taking a central position was that the four perspectives are related to each other and should therefore not be separated. Yet all participants were convinced that designers should involve themselves and contribute to the large challenges we face as society by providing their skills and knowledge in service. The role of specifically design research remains open. A contributing challenge herein is, as one of the participants stated. *'... that longitudinal, that continuity [of design for social innovation] is a particular challenge for funding research, [...] there are difficulties in funding activity over long period of time.'*

## References

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### About the Catalysts:

**Mascha van der Voort** is professor in Human-Centred Design and co-director of DesignLab at the University of Twente. Her credo is that meaningful solutions to the challenges we face as society can only be designed through a cross-disciplinary approach and co-creation.

**Thomas Binder** is professor in Codesign at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Schools of Design. He is part of the co-design research center, CODE engaging open design collaborations and participatory design in the context of design anthropology, interaction design and social innovation.

**Jacob Buur** is professor of User-Centred Design at the University of Southern Denmark and research director of the SDU Design Research Environment. Jacob develops methods for studying and involving

users in design, in particular video techniques for bridging user studies and innovation.

**Per Linde** is an Interaction designer and Associate Professor at Malmö University. His current research relates to how the Internet of Things can address societal challenges.

**Robert-Jan den Haan** is a PhD researcher in Human-Centred Design at the University of Twente. His research focuses on supporting collaboration in multi-actor settings with strong socio-technical complexity.