Utopian, Molecular and Sociological Social Design

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The history of social design goes back several decades. Following Victor Margolin, we argue that the mainstream of social design has built on utopic visions of society that have had their roots variously in technology, architecture and politics. In this paper, we argue there are new forms of social design that are not utopic, but rather build on other premises. We distinguish two new forms, molecular social design and sociological social design. The former is happy to change society one step at the time without a larger vision. The latter builds on sociological theory to target the social structures that produce social inequalities and the practices that maintain them. Our example of molecular social design is Katja Soini's IKE project in Helsinki, Finland. The example of sociological social design considers the Design Innovation & Citizenship program in Glasgow, Scotland, and its engagement with a remote island community.

Keywords – Social Design, Design, Utopia, Molecular Sociology, Weak Modernity.

Relevance to Design Practice – This paper clarifies the ideological basis of social design. It describes three bases, utopian, molecular and sociological, and gives examples of each of these. It helps social designers to understand how they can relate to their object, the social.

Introduction

This paper aims to clarify the concept of "social design" by distinguishing three different ways in which social design works. As a broad term, *design for social change* has been in existence for about 50 years, even if we look at it in design only, rather than in the social sciences, policy-making or public debate. Social design is of newer, but uncertain origin, gaining popularity after the financial crisis of 2008. It is usually associated with social entrepreneurship, social movements, social innovation and design activism (see Armstrong, Bailey, Julier, & Kimbell, 2014; Markussen, 2015).

For various reasons, a clarification is more relevant than before. Since the turn of the century, designers have explored many new opportunities beyond the traditional design disciplines like glass and ceramics, textile and furniture. Many of these developments have brought designers into contact with social processes of various kinds, including interaction design (Dourish, 2004), community building (Meroni, 2007), the public sector (Dorst, 2015), service design (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011), social innovation (Manzini, 2015) and design activism (Julier 2013; Markussen, 2013). What is common to all these efforts is that they all deal with social objects of various sorts, be these small groups, communities or formal organizations of various kinds.

As we shall argue, these developments have introduced several new dimensions to more familiar definitions of social design. Most of these definitions usually trace their origins to Victor Papanek's (1984) criticism of commercial design in the sixties and his agenda of "designing for the weak." In the terminology of Armstrong and her colleagues, this is socially responsible design that covers things like inclusive design, health and design in the developing countries (Armstrong et al., 2014).

As there seems to be no agreement about the meaning of this concept, we take a step back and take stock of the discourse around social design. This paper is a response to an observation we made regarding the motivations that appear to drive social designers. These seem to vary, from Papanek's utopianism to the plainly commercial, which is the case with a good deal of service design. By implication, the conceptual and theoretical tools of designers are variable. Looking at the motivations and the tools, we believe that distinguishing at least three types of "social design" helps to understand and delineate this concept better. The difference, we want to stress, is not so much in the actual design work, but in the conceptual and motivational scaffolding of the work.[1]

Utopian Social Design

In a recent exhibition catalog *Design for the Good Society*, Victor Margolin (2015) traces the origins of social design to utopias of various sorts, ranging from Papanek's *Design for the Real World* to the dire predictions of the Club of Rome. He develops his paper from his earlier work that argued for using social work interventions as a model for social design that would turn design from a market-oriented discipline to something that serves "people with low incomes or special needs due to age, health, or disability" (Margolin, V. & Margolin, S., 2002, p. 25). Margolin then relates these to some of the utopian traditions in the West, including that of Buckminster Fuller. He argues that building on these utopias may be useful for social design, but notes that design should build on a vision of a "Good Society" that could move designers to address real world issues in an open-ended manner.

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The value of such visionary projects has been to provide a space for aspirations that have no other locus for expression. While recognizing the aspirational value of utopian ideals, the Good Society project should move beyond them. Though energized and animated by utopian thought, it addresses real world situations and could be realized by real world actions. However unlike the image of Spaceship Earth, which is one of a closed entity, the Good Society is open and is being shaped by thousands of people and not just groups of experts who are piloting the spaceship (Margolin, 2015, p. 41).

As he also notes in the same essay, design can be a productive activity that helps to build a safe, equitable and clean Earth if the structures that constitute society function well. If design leaves dysfunctional structures untouched, it becomes an obstacle to change.

Margolin lists current large-scale global political issues that he sees as suitable for utopian design interventions. His list includes population growth, ageing, climate change, increased and maybe unsustainable consumption of natural resources, global financial system running out of control, unacceptable levels of inequality, loss of employment opportunities due to expert systems and robots, and fundamentalist religious beliefs. He also notes that there are many projects targeting these issues and that designers have been involved in quite a number of these global initiatives. His examples include the DESIS network, the Cumulus network, Designers without Borders, Architects for Humanity and so on. His vision is of design as an agent that helps to:

> lay the groundwork for a radical rethinking of how human beings can organize themselves in a global society to insure a fair distribution of wealth and the delivery of rights such as education, food, and housing to insure the well-being of everyone. (Margolin, 2015, p. 38)

A case that shows how this vision might work in reality comes from Vila Rosario, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In their PhD work, Andrea Judice (2014) and Marcelo Judice (2014) studied this impoverished community in detail and worked with health agents, local women hired and trained by the local *pro bono* clinic to identify and to supervise the treatment of tuberculosis outpatients. They studied the community through a mix of "innovative" methods like cultural probes, Surrealist props and interaction analyses (see also Judice et al., 2015). On rewriting the brief from a focus on creating high-tech designs to low-tech things

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like posters and TB booklets, they created a fictional Vila Rosario; a collection of comic characters that was used in a design program that told the story of tuberculosis, focusing on its symptoms and its course of treatment, but that also told its etiology in a series of designs. Picture 1 shows a page from a booklet telling how to pay attention to the symptoms of tuberculosis and how to seek treatment.

The utopian intent behind this work was the idea that good design should not be the prerogative of the rich North only. This work was certainly not built on any sort of anti-capitalist utopia, but a larger vision of an equal world came to it through the theoretical backdoor of Paolo Freire and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005), a mélange of many sources, but especially Georgy Lucacs's Marxism that stressed the importance of changing consciousness to change society, Sartre's existentialism, which fuelled his optimistic belief in human freedom, and a genuinely Brazilian concern for educating the poor of that country so that they could improve their own condition without a revolt that would turn them into the new masters of society. Andrea and Marcelo Judice saw Vila Rosario as a test case for building a design program that could be transferred to other marginal
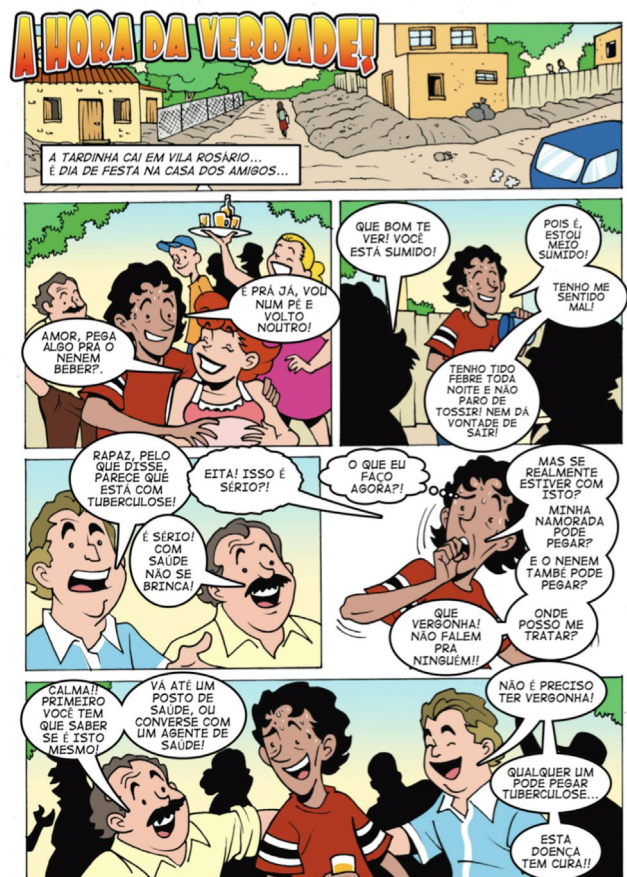

Figure 1. The first page of a tuberculosis booklet designed in Vila Rosario, Rio de Janeiro. On this page, a young man learns from his friends that he may have the symptoms of TB. Being horrified, his friends tell him that there is a cure and he can get into treatment by contacting local health agents.
Thanks to Andrea and Marcelo Judice.

communities in Brazil and, perhaps, Africa. Their test cases for this idea were in Windhoek, Namibia and Vila Mimosa, Rio's notorious red light district and the main hub of HIV transmission in the metropolis (A. Judice, 2014; M. Judice, 2014).

A good deal of service design for the public sector builds on utopian elements, though often indirectly. For example, the welfare state, which may be the single most significant planned social innovation, has roots in utopian socialism, the social democracies of Northern Europe and the initiatives of conservative politicians like Otto von Bismarck, who initiated social reforms to pre-empt the rising threat of the working-class movement. Working with, say, social services, means that designers participate in this project, even though its historical roots may have been obscured, and designers focus on improving situations they face without paying attention to the larger structures that create those situations in which they normally act, often to their disadvantage.

Molecular Social Design

Many designers who work on social topics shy away from utopic ideals and massive cries for change, choosing to work in a subtler manner. They are not alone among young contemporary designers, many of whom have, of necessity, discarded the economic model of the 20th Century and turned to *autoproduzzione* in the absence of industrial jobs. Their mentality is *molecular*, aiming at doing the best in conditions that do not make it possible for them to make claims of initiating massive changes and they are skeptical about their peers making such claims.

This spirit is perceptively captured by one of the *maestros* of Italian design, Andrea Branzi. In a recent catalogue, he contrasts the revolutionary generation of the sixties with the current generation. As he sees it, the latter is happy to change the world in a molecular fashion without a need for utopias that animated design work in the sixties:

> Young designers see that the world around them is ugly and wrong, so they try to reform it straightway, starting with a new seat, a vase or a toy ... this political practice occurs without theoretization ... action follows a molecular strategy, a sort of enzymatic energy that does not product traumatic change but slow transformations. The historical climate to which this generation belongs is typified by the decision to implement great transformations by starting with the infinitely small (design), the apparently superfluous, and inadequate structures. After one hundred years of modernity, which has theoretized mega-projects and maxi-reforms, the era has finally arrived in which transformations are set in motion through sub-systems, micro-structures, domestic economies. (Branzi, 2013, p. 16).

Branzi has articulated this vision of society in more detail in his book *Weak Modernity* (2006), which departs from his earlier concept of second modernity. In this earlier work, he reflected on the consumer society of the sixties in much the same manner as Zygmunt Bauman and his fellow sociologists, whose analysis the consumer society broke the centralized bureaucratic power of government in post-war Europe (and we might add, the turn

of the millennium Asia) (for example, Bauman & May, 2000). If Branzi is correct, molecular designers have left this consumerist background behind.

Most examples that Branzi cites come from Italy and are usually designers working in the small-scale production of objects of various sorts. In social design, this molecular strategy can better be seen in the unassuming projects of Katja Soini in Helsinki. Her first project IKE[2] in 2004 focused on the problems of repair construction of blocks of flats in Helsinki (Soini, 2015). Its problem was the engineering and architectural mentality of housing repair projects that normally occur without much respect for the residents or their inconvenience. Such projects are dictated by technical needs and people are treated as barely more than items on a flowchart. Specifically, the study focused on renovating the water and sewage pipes, which are massively expensive to change. Their repair often pushes people out of their homes for six months and fills the houses with fine dust for months afterwards. Soini planned and ran several workshops in the project, documented these and wrote a manual that described how repair could be done in a resident-centric fashion. She initially participated in the project as a research assistant. After receiving her Master's degree, she realized that the project had led to changes in national policy. These changes became the topic of her PhD thesis, which tracked the impact of the project over several years.

For Soini, IKE has two particularly interesting features. First, it was driven by the then emerging idea of "collaborative design" and its aim of improving the lives of a specific group of people. She used various empathic and participatory design techniques and conducted most of her work in workshops that brought together residents and interest groups from the construction industry. Through these workshops, she gave priority to the residents' opinions at the expense of the repair experts. Second, this demonstrates that such molecular projects can lead to massive changes given the right conditions. In Soini's study, this was the case. She worked in a pilot project of a Ministry and even though the project was small, it was initiated and observed by a *éminence grise*, who was unhappy with the usual engineering and architecture-led mentality that paid no attention whatsoever to residents. He was happy with the project and helped Soini and her co-researchers to write a booklet about how repair could be done in a resident-centric fashion. Later elements of this book led to changes in the laws of the country, which meant that IKE left a permanent mark.

Despite this success, which Soini came to learn about years after IKE when she was working on her PhD, her mentality was molecular. Quite simply, she wanted to do good design work, humbly, close the door and go home. She had no utopic visions of any sort and she began to read social science literature only in her PhD work, after the fact. Even then, she discarded most of this literature, which she felt did not do justice to IKE and its aftermath. She was also reading contemporary art critics like Claire Bishop (2012) and Grant Kester (2004, 2011), which led her to discover that what she was doing was not art, but design. The best way to work, she saw, was to avoid artistic statements that might awaken people, but equally likely alienate them from her intentions. This humble mentality and aesthetics have continued in her other work ever since.

We have no explanation for why many social designers have gone *molecular* over the last few years, but we can speculate (see also Armstrong et al., 2014). One reason is the growth of design education. As Branzi (2010) has noted elsewhere, design has recently become a mass profession. Few designers find jobs in traditional design. Instead, they have had to construct new self-defining concepts that have pushed them to extend the boundaries of design practice from objects to immaterial things. One response has been social design, but it cannot provide much in the way of livelihood through market forces alone. If this is correct, molecular social design is an adaptation to the meager existence many young designers face these days. It may also be a response to disappointment with financial (as opposed to industrial) capitalism and the way in which governments saved the financial world and created a deep split between those who have and the have-nots (Marazzi, 2011).

Certain theoretical readings may also be behind this ethos. Having grown up with Foucault's omnipresent and amorphous view of power, molecular designers may find it hard to believe in the power or viability of utopian ideals. The era of the seventies, when class-based politics was at the heart of society, is over. It is much harder to choose sides these days, when institutions appear simultaneously omnipotent and powerless, and the consequences of any action are difficult to predict or clearly ascertain. A molecular approach may be a "most rational" choice in these circumstances typical to Branzi's (2006) weak modernity. There are some pockets in which a more political version of social design is possible, however, such as places mistreated by the global economy.[3]

Sociological Social Design

What we call sociological social design differs from its utopian and molecular cousins in one significant respect. It builds on sociological theory. This gives it conceptual tools useful in analyzing society and those structures that reify aspects of it into forms that appear as inescapable facts and the forces that shape these structures. Theory may also provide reflexive tools—for instance, analytical frameworks and terminology for conceiving and conceptualizing change, which is especially the case in Marxist influenced writing. Theory, perhaps most importantly, also offers design a shared language or discursive starting point with social scientists, who populate most sectors of the government and who are responsible for directing the public sector's resources, for better or worse.

Sociological social design affords designers a critical stance and investigation of the presently pertaining social relations, allowing a more explicit critique than that of molecular design and a more theoretically grounded position than utopian design. The Glasgow School of Art's Design Innovation & Citizenship program is one example of a *sociological* social design. The Citizenship program seeks to formulate an opportunity for design practice to operate as a critical discourse, borrowing from classical sociological theory (especially Marx) and more recent "critical theory" and its antecedents (broadly, "the Frankfurt School"). It seeks to forge a link between the material practices of design and the critical impulse of the social sciences, in particular sociology. Central to this pursuit is a focus on the relationship between people and things, the traditional concerns of both sociologists and designers, but this time through the lens of social *interaction* or the "actor-network theory" of Bruno Latour (1987).

Projects engaged in by the program include investigations into the remote, rural communities of northern and western Scotland, where dwindling populations and economic opportunities combine to threaten the viability of small towns and villages. The outcomes of such investigations were neither the traditional (but innovated) objects of molecular designs nor the socio-political aspirations of utopian design, but rather a series of intermediate artifacts or interactive moments that sought to capture and communicate, visually or verbally, the competing views, standpoints and aspirations of participants in sets of behaviors such as health and education. However, such outcomes are themselves problematic, existing as neither design(ed) solutions nor policy change. The challenge for sociological social design is to formulate a category of designed outcome equal to its critical ambitions (see Weber, 2010).

In the program, designers tackle complex issues born of contemporary capitalist society's complex division of labor and its inhabitants' experiences using sociological theory. These issues—for example, the role of the State as provider of services such as health or education or the realization of sustainable island communities—seldom lend themselves to ready comprehension by the layperson or top-down policy formulations. Absorbed in their everyday life, citizens are often unaware of those social forces that reproduce the circumstances in which they live, so are often unable to respond in a meaningful manner. The analytical power of social theory, specifically sociology, underpins the critical position taken up by "sociological" designers and thereby informs design(s) that respond to these so often invisible and inaccessible forces.

This is not the whole story, though. Another indispensable component of the program is the designer's facility with the material manipulation of artifacts that afford a tangible intervention in the world, whether in two, three or four dimensions. In the program, design as a material practice comes into its own as a means of visualizing normative beliefs, shared experiences and power structures, and a means of making these available for critique. Design also affords opportunities for alternative formulations, just as it may offer a means of sometimes prototyping innovative solutions, but, more typically, a re-framing of issues since the tangibility of designed *things* underpins the construction of a "public" or "democratic" form of "material participation" (Binder, Brandt, Ehn, & Halse, 2015; Marres, 2012) in the realm of values, behaviors and beliefs (for design things, see Binder et al., 2011).

This union of theory and practice, of critique as construction, seeks to move towards a position as both *method* of investigation and mode of experiencing; an epistemological practice capable of generating a critical understanding of the present moment and its social relations in material/visual form. These *things* are designed artifacts that allow the interplay of sociological investigation and the material of everyday life in a manner that allows designer and stakeholder(s) to construct a dialogical critique of the *status quo*.

Figure 2 indicates how design Masters students worked with an island community on Colonsay in the Western Isles of Scotland to explore contemporary life there and to contextualize it in historical and socio-economic terms. In this example, a group of students mapped and evaluated the assets held by three classes of stakeholders: islanders, estate and second home-owners, and tourists (including ex-pats). They used this mapping to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, propose possible change and to quantify the combined assets identified at a communal, rather than individual, level. The aim was to create a process that connected what people in Colonsay required or sought and how this could be achieved by fostering new relationships and that might engender new opportunities for those living on or frequenting the island. In visualizing this, the design students bring into the public domain and discursive scrutiny the assets, private or public, of the community considered in its entirety, regardless of property ownership. The ambition here was to identify what a community could share based on renegotiating the relations between individually-owned artifacts like businesses and houses and thereby lessen reliance on the Scottish mainland and its political structures, including the transport infrastructure.

Such an attempt to pose questions using material means and to posit notions of "preferable futures" derived from the words, actions and aspirations of contemporary citizens, echoes the critical impulse found in the traditions of sociology and social theory. In this example, students utilized an ethnographic approach to develop artifacts capable of supporting a dialogue that could incorporate a critical framework derived from prior sociological practice. The specificity of life on Colonsay becomes a determining factor in the evolution of a design response, which is mediated by the critical framework of social science. Frisby (1988) describes the investigation of modernity and the modern as a sociological endeavor, noting "the object of study is […]

determined not merely by a particular mode of viewing modern life but by the new mode of experiencing a new social reality itself" (p. 6). In this way, the approaches of critical thinkers such as Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin provide the basis of "what one may term a sociology of modes of experiencing modernity" (Frisby, 1988, pp. 6-7). Here design can function as a *mode* of viewing and interrogating contemporary society; it can operate as a quasi-sociological enquiry that acknowledges and uses artifacts as readily as analytical observation.

Sociology is just one of the possible sources for understanding society. One reason for turning to it, however, is clear enough. The things designers encounter in society have a background surprisingly often in the social sciences. After 70 years of professional empirical research, sociologists have planned many structures of society, they keep them running and they create new knowledge that is used to fashion emerging structures like concepts, categories and processes that, down the line, are written into objects, spaces, navigation patterns on the Internet and materials. By addressing sociological theory, designers can comprehend the origin of these concepts and enter into a dialogue over emerging formulations that seek to communicate contemporary experience. This observation also identifies one limit of sociological social design. Sociology is but one of the social sciences and it is not the only discipline that has an intimate relationship with the government or other social institutions.

Discussion

This paper has aimed at clarifying "social design." The concept "social" is as ambiguous as many other key concepts in the social sciences, but we have analyzed some of the uses of the concept as it relates to contemporary design practice. Our aim was to illuminate some of the constituent assumptions behind
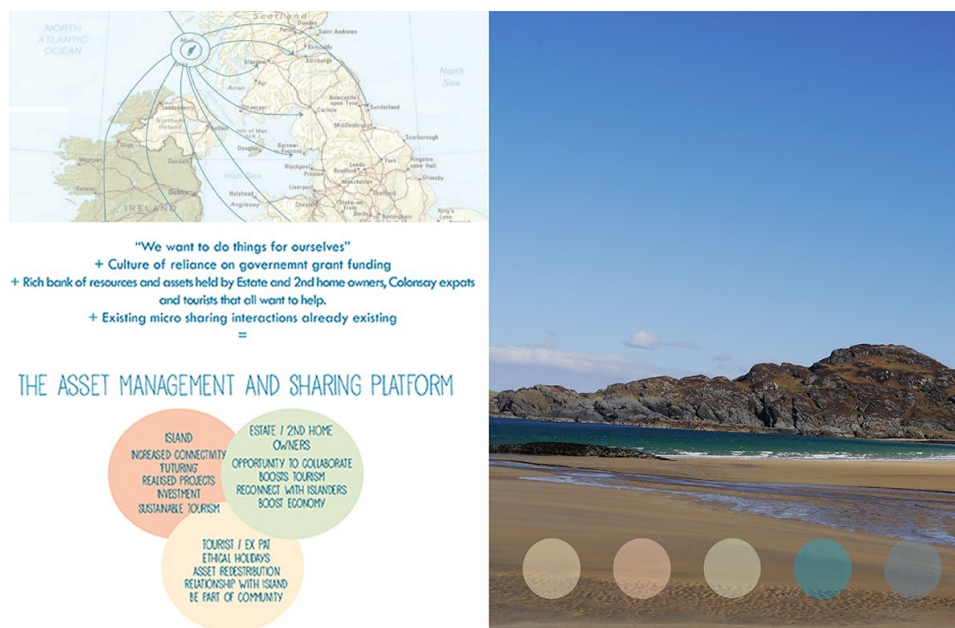

Figure 2. An example from Design Innovation & Citizenship program, reorganized for this paper.
Thanks to Rebecca Birch, Hyuna Shin, Craig Alun Smith, and Erin Reeg.

the concept. Our belief is that any concept has a meaning within discourse, which means that to understand the meaning, we need to turn to that discourse and use its features as distinguishing criteria.

With this method, we described three main definitions of "social design." The first definition is familiar from design writing. It situates design in the utopian ideals of politics, counter-movements, and design visions like Buckminster Fuller's Spaceship Earth, Viktor Papanek's (2015) critique of design and Good Society. Here, social design derives its meaning from utopian beliefs that give meaning to the design outcomes. The second definition is molecular (Branzi, 2013). Molecular social designers are happy to improve the world one notch at a time, regardless of whether these notches accumulate to larger changes or contribute to some grand vision of a better world. The changes are small, particular to the issue and derive their justification from the situation and its specifics. Both definitions differ from the third sociological definition in which design is informed by sociological theory, which gives designers an insight into the social structures that produce and maintain the situations they try to change. This sociological social design can be molecular in its strategy, but it can also aim at changes in structures that pertain to persistent social problems through an address to policy formulation. It builds on social science knowledge, which makes it different from utopian design.

The mainstream is no doubt utopian. For instance, this volume, we suspect, is going to be filled with papers that aim to improve society with technological devices and service schemes. The utopian definition certainly gets most of the attention in the writing about social design. Yet, some of the most interesting recent work in design is clearly anti-utopian and more consistent with Branzi's description of "molecular design".[4] Sociological social design, on the other hand, is still a rarity in the larger panorama of design. Here, the underlying ethos is not moralistic, but sociological and even though social scientists certainly possess political views—and some of their theories are political arguments in disguise—the difference remains clear as long as their arguments are not designed to win support among the electorate, but rather to gain appreciation and traction among fellow researchers.

Our observations must be taken with several pinches of salt. In terms of the implications for design, the differences between these definitions can be deceptively small. Designers produce things that contribute to or change the situations in which they are used. These things can be products, visual designs, multimedia interactions or spaces, but also immaterial things like processes and classifications. Following Jantzer and Weinstein (2014), some designs aim at changing the situation, while others focus on objects. In either category, the designers can either work as outside experts who seek to impose their expert definitions on people or as insiders who seek to articulate local needs through some variety of co-design process.

One implication of the fact that social designers usually end up creating objects or situations is that they look quite similar. A desk for returning books to the library or a syringe exchange box will not look very different regardless of whether it is done by a designer leaning towards utopias versus a designer whose sympathies are molecular. Again, our warning is to look at the background and not be misled by the appearances. Lumping various designers together by looking at their design outcomes alone would be akin to saying that there is no difference between a grill by Electrolux and one by DeLonghi. Although the function and the appearance of such design artifacts may be similar, they are still distinctly different in genesis and may even be irreconcilable.

One question our reviewers raised was about criticality in molecular social design. We believe it is content with local changes and agnostic about the power of design to make society-wide changes. It can be critical, but it does not claim to create blueprints for changing the basic structures of society. A related question the reviewers raised was about the scale of change. It is easy to make large-scale, even global, utopian claims about change, while the molecular strategy takes local constraints seriously and usually has a bottom-up strategy. We suspect that although sociological social design usually works locally, it can also turn the public sector into a lever for large-scale changes easier than the other two approaches by *prototyping* possible policies. The third concern of the reviewers was the role of theory. The definitions of utopian social designers build on political, artistic and architectural languages the governments seldom recognize. Molecular social design, in its part, usually works with a local community, which makes it efficient locally, but creates a distance from the government at large. The main power of sociological social design is that it shares its definition of the social with the larger society. This gives design a powerful rhetoric, which may constitute a means of addressing governmental institutions and practices.

We see the three approaches that we have described as tendencies, rather than categories. We do not believe in putting the approaches into a matrix, which would lead to confusions and to a false sense of precision. Many sociological theories, for instance, have a utopian basis. This is in particular the case of the Marxist theories, which posit a realm of freedom under communism that is clearly a utopian postulate. As a recent British report said, social design is currently a discursive moment rather than a field or discipline (Armstrong et al., 2014). We hope to have gone some way in clarifying the basis of this moment. The main ambition of this paper was that it turned its attention to the discursive *background* of the concept. Concepts come from somewhere. If we want to understand them, we have to investigate this background. For us, this is good news. The concept of social design is flexible and can be interpreted in many ways as long as it is understood as a part of debate rather than a definition in a dictionary.

Endnotes

1. Most social designers finish their projects with physical objects or service plans. These objects range from public furniture to virtual products, urban plans and situations. Jantzer and Weinstein (2014) analyze how these products relate to the social context. In their analysis, objects may be distinguished from situations. Both can be designed from

outside, but also from within. For example, some social design aims to transform situations using the participants' categories rather than designers'.

2. The abbreviation comes from the Finnish name of the project, *Ihmisten ja kiinteistöjen elämänsyklit*, which can be translated as Living Cycles of People and Buildings.

3. In the Foucauldian analysis, power today is diffused and omnipresent rather than split in two blocks along the left-right axis as in much of the 20th Century. If this analysis is right, utopias may have lost their social basis. One consequence for social design is that it has to find local ways to make change rather than aim at making massive changes by aligning with politicians or the government.

4. As one of the authors has argued elsewhere (Koskinen, 2016), the molecular vision has many similarities to contemporary art of the sixties and especially to conceptual art and its heirs.

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