

Politics please, we're social designers

Cameron Tonkinwise

On August 5th, the Parsons DESIS Lab (of which I am a member) opened an exhibition at the Abrons Arts Center in the Lower East Side of New York City. The exhibition, running until September 15th, is part of the DESIS Lab's Amplifying Creative Communities research project, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation's 2009 NYC Cultural Innovation Fund. (DESIS = Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability, an international network of researchers.)

What happens if design-based social innovation is not just a way of avoiding conventional, explicit politics, but a way of undermining politics altogether?

The exhibition is not a curation of findings at the end of the project, but a research tool in the middle of a project. It is one of a number of initiatives that are part of the Amplifying Creative Communities project to find examples of people who have taken it upon themselves to innovate new ways of resourcing their everyday lives, normally involving some sort of sharing. The assumption is that people around the world are giving up waiting for government or business to develop more sustainable (both ecologically and socially) ways of living and working, and so are starting to do it for themselves. Having found these sorts of innovations, the project is then exploring how design can enhance their effectiveness, and how design can help others take up similar innovations.

The Amplifying Creative Communities project is therefore about the sustainability of sustainability. It is about making the sort of innovations toward more sustainable societies that are arising in neighborhoods all over at the moment more sustainable, that is, less fragile and more permanent, less sporadic and more pervasive.

Compared to a lot of 'social design' currently being done, DESIS is interesting because of the emphasis it places on design as redesign (to quote Jan Michl). A key aspect to 'amplifying' is that the designers cannot claim to be the originators of the innovative ideas; they are rather the enhancers of innovations that neighbors, communities and community organizations have already come up with. The assumption is that the systems these non-designers have come up with could do with some redesign; that lending them some design expertise will make the systems easier and more effective, allowing them to be more readily taken up by people other than their originating champions.

Where does this project sit in relation to others at the moment that attempt to bring 'design thinking' to 'social innovation?' There is plenty of 'argy-bargy' at the moment about these terms. Expanding design beyond the modernist profession of designing stuff, and so beyond something that only practicing designers can do, continues to rankle. And then there have been the recent spats about 'do-good design.' The complaint here, which is an old one (see Ivan Illich, but also Oscar Wilde, as I recently learned from Slavoj Zizek), is about the imposing superficiality of Western Northerners attempting to solve wicked problems in the Central/South. If you are not from there, how deep can your empathetic design thinking of the situation be? And if you do not stay there, how sustainably iterative can your design thinking propositions be? Without deep enough immersion or long enough follow-through, no matter how good the design, it will risk seeming to be an imposition, and perhaps imperial. The better thing to do therefore is to do-good only at home, where presumably the gaps between privileged designers and underprivileged recipients of their solutioning are smaller, or at least harder to avoid.

But there are other difficulties involved in design-enabled social innovation, even when done in your own backyard, like the Lower East Side. And it is these difficulties that the Amplifying Creative Communities project is researching.

Being ethical, in order to avoid politics, is a political position.

Ethics is often considered distinct from politics. Politicians seem to be only rarely ethical, and being ethical is often a good way of transcending politics. If I use my design skills to help the

needy, then I am perhaps excused from having to declare who I vote for, let alone having to canvas for them. Social innovation by design can appear to be doubly avoiding of more conventional political positioning because not only is it ethically minded—what is being innovated are ways of improving the social good—but it is also based on initiatives by the people in those communities of needs—it is innovation for the 'social' by the 'social'; the designer can claim to be just the apolitical doula to people helping themselves.

However, what happens if design-based social innovation is not just a way of avoiding conventional, explicit politics, but a way of undermining politics altogether? What if scaling up existing innovations with redesign is not just about helping people temporarily frustrated with the inertial cowardice of elected representatives, but a way to make more or less permanently redundant the need for any government to find a way to negotiate political responses to current crises?

Take for instance, one of the challenges for social innovations that the Amplifying Creative Communities exhibition has focused on: 'taking care of the elderly.' This area of innovation emerged from observations and interviews in the Lower East Side, research that was being conducted just as New York City budget cuts were reducing the number of Senior Centers all over New York City, so it was prominent in what people were talking about. The researchers (Parsons students Rostislav Roznoshchik and Miki Aso, under the direction of the Amplifying lead faculty, Lara Penin and Eduardo Staszowski), heard from people good ideas for DIY replacements for the services provided by those closing facilities. But if design helps those ideas get realized, then those services will definitely get cut rather than resisted with strong protest, and they will not need to return when (if?) the City's coffers re-increase.

This might be a good thing. Perhaps there is some essential government trait that makes their services increasingly poor, in which case social services should be removed from governments. (And perhaps there is some essential business trait, or bigger-than-SME business trait, that makes their service improvements increasingly expensive, in which case social services should be provided by local community organizations.) The point is: this is a very political position. It may not make you a member of the Tea Party, but it does put you on the 'make-government-smaller' side of the neoliberal-liberal spectrum. In other words, being ethical, in order to avoid politics, is a political position, most definitely if you are trying to design (or redesign existing innovations in) non-government-based social services.

This has become very apparent because of the most recent elections in the UK. The Tories, now in power as a result of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, ran explicitly on the slogan 'Big Society.' This refers to a society in which communities support themselves, rather than continue to depend on the welfare state. Designers are already facilitating social innovations that can replace government services that David Cameron has a mandate to cut the cost of. The rhetoric, as a recent Economist article on social innovation made clear, is all about doing services better, but in ways that just happen to also save the government money and, more importantly, withdraw governments irrevocably from such services. Designers participating in Big Society initiatives are now going to have conservative government as patrons (communities are presumably the clients, or co-creators). In that context, there is then no avoiding the fact that design-based social innovation is in the pay of one side of politics (though is there an alternative left?).

The situation is beginning to arrive in the US. The Obama Administration's Office of Social Innovation a couple of weeks ago announced its first round of funding. The recipients tend to be more well-established community-based social service providers, rather than innovative start-ups, or design thinkers. However, the mission of the OSI is "to find social innovations that have succeeded on a small scale and to help them have a far bigger impact... 'investing in what works'." This sounds identical to the research questions of our Amplifying project. So, as researchers in the international DESIS network, we are now wondering whether there is a difference between designing for social innovation in the US under an Obama Administration and designing for social innovation in the UK under a Cameron Administration? We can no longer avoid taking a conventionally political stance.

Nor is it merely a matter of a one-off decision—it becomes a decisive aspect of the (re)design brief, a political position with which to judge our (re)design ideas and processes. An explicitly political design-based social innovation is one that does more than make innovative shared resource systems developed by people in the Lower East Side easier and more effective for those currently making them happen, and for others who would like to take them up. It should also make ways of politically lobbying on behalf of those systems easier and more effective. For example, many social innovations are initially semi-legal if not illegal. If I participate in a meal-sharing system in my apartment block, cooking for neighbors a few nights a week and 'dining out' at their places other nights a week, I might need Department of Health certification for my kitchen, no matter how well-designed the toolkit for 'domestic cooking at scale' that I am deploying. In that case, to be sustainable, these sorts of social innovations need to get regulations changed. Amplifying social innovations would demand rewriting laws as a result of carefully designed electoral pressure.

Another very real example: The Amplifying Creative Communities exhibition focuses on the many community gardens in the Lower East Side. The hypothesis was that these long-standing creative communities were nodes for other kinds of social innovations; they were gateways into the less visible support networks of the Lower East Side. However, a few days after the exhibition opened, New York City held hearings about whether to renew the moratorium against development that has protected the gardens for the last 10 years. At that point in our research, we came face to face with limitations on the power of design: facilitating the clear social innovations toward more sustainable urban living represented by the well-established, decades-old, community gardens in the Lower East Side, remains a battle against recalcitrant old politics of property rights and their associated 'opportunity costs'.

So, go have a look at the Amplifying Creative Communities exhibition if you are in New York City. Have a look and see if you can work out our politics? Is the design of the exhibition, its videos, and posters, and installations, and wall text, imperial, or neoliberal? Does it have the politics of design trying to seem apolitical? Or are the ideas that are being collected not just remedial of cost-cutting forced by poor planning and under investment, but genuine innovations, creating more valuable ways of sustaining our societies? Tell us what we more we should be doing—by design, AND by politics?

Fonte: Core77, Sept. 1th 2010. Disponível em:< www.core77.com>. Acesso em: 28 set. 2010.