

## Conclusion

In this book, I set out to tell stories and theorize how design practitioners and scholars might contribute to democracy, using design as a mode of inquiry. Such work is not without difficulty. In fact, it might be best characterized by the difficulties it encounters, and the ways it is fragile, contingent, partial, and compromised. A defining characteristic of this work is that it is situated: it is undertaken in relationship with others, with people and institutions, values and desires, in ever-changing circumstances. While I have attempted to closely describe such experiments and give contours to a practice, any articulation of these experiments will always be incomplete because they are always in the making.

As I write this conclusion, we are in the midst of a global pandemic. The concerns that shape our civic environments and experiences have changed. The work of democratic inquiry and design experiments changes to meet these conditions. For instance, as part of its Smart and Connected Communities funding program, the National Science Foundation has announced a call for grants that examine how communities might make use of smart-cities technologies to shape life in a post-COVID-19 era. Les's work has shifted as his worry now is supporting those who are unhoused during the pandemic. Concrete Jungle continues its work of foraging and has also expanded into a grocery delivery program distributing food to over nine hundred people a week. In each case, questions arise that warrant attention. Who will be invited and able to contribute to setting the agenda and participating in research toward a post-COVID-19 era? Can data be of use in serving those who are without the most basic asset of safe shelter? Or is collecting such data in fact counterproductive, perhaps even dangerous to those in need? What procedures and systems are needed to enable a

bricolage of regional farmers, federal and state subsidies, and hundreds of volunteers to coordinate mutual aid? Engaging with such questions continues the work of democratic inquiry and design experiments. Engaging with such questions continues the work of caring for our collective futures. Working in ways that are humble, just, and collaborative enables us to participate in exploring varied democratic practices in the now and contributing to imaginaries of what might be next.

It is tempting to fixate on politics in the large—the imperatives of global development, of nation-states, of transnational regulations and policies. There is distinctive power and authority that politics in the large attends to. What's more, such politics in the large dovetails with the scale of much of contemporary technology—with artificial intelligence, machine learning, and big data. Without a doubt, that scale of politics and action is important. Yes, we need multinational pharmaceutical companies and governments to work together to develop and distribute vaccines. Yes, there is value in employing data and algorithms toward tracking, understanding, and mitigating the spread of a virus. At the same time, the scale of democracies in the small, the closeness of the conditions we experience in our daily lives, also need to be tended to. We need networks of informal organizations providing support to those in need of food and housing. There is also value in using simple tools and techniques to organize and sustain care, and at times there is value in *not* collecting data, in avoiding or resisting surveillance regimes that too often cause harm.

The question of scale, then, is not one of either/or but rather both/and (Hunt 2020). We are surrounded by crisis—the crisis of a global pandemic, the crisis of climate change, the crisis of democracy. Some of these are imminent, others are evolving. All are daunting. We need stories, theories, and practices that enable us to collectively act at different scales in these crises. My focus with these design experiments has been on local democracies. This is not because I believe that particular scale is more significant, but because of a desire for intimacy in engaged scholarship. In the close conditions of civics, democracy becomes intimate. Through design experiments we can act in that closeness, and through our actions we can perceive and experience the current conditions of democracy and also how our communal lives might be differently configured.

While these crises unfold, free-market ideologies continue to be prioritized in many civic contexts, and this threatens democracy. The prevailing

discourses of smart cities remain those of efficiency through streamlining government as a service, made possible by private infrastructure and the monetization of public life. Consider the Quayside project in Toronto: a proposed smart neighborhood built from the ground up in collaboration with Sidewalk Labs. The project was critiqued from the start, and rightly so. While collaborations between industry, government, civil society, and communities are common enough, the plans for the Quayside project suggested an audacious interlacing of public and private sectors, enacted through smart-cities technologies and the medium of data. These plans were contested by more than activists and advocates. Venture capitalists referred to them as “a dystopian vision that has no place in a democratic society,” and industry leaders called them “a colonizing experiment in surveillance capitalism attempting to bulldoze important urban, civic and political issues” (Cecco 2020). The advent of COVID-19 brought an end to the affair (or at least to that chapter). Due to “unprecedented economic uncertainty,” Sidewalk Labs declared that the project was no longer “financially viable” and walked away (Cecco 2020). This is unsurprising. It is, however, telling. In the midst of a civic crisis, this vision of a smart city abandons the city. Perhaps COVID-19 provided an opportune set of circumstances to exit the project. But one could imagine a number of other responses to both the critiques and the crisis.

Such visions are not going away. They will reappear again and elsewhere. In many cases, such visions are much less grand and therefore much less apparent, but nonetheless pernicious. In San Diego, activists and academics are coming together to work against smart streetlights. These streetlights seem innocuous, but they are in fact data-capturing devices strewn across the city, creating a network of surveillance (Whitney et al. 2021). Even when activists succeed in convincing the city to stop the surveillance, contracts with vendors may allow the data to continue to be captured, stored, and presumably used. Similar stories exist in other cities. Technological governance and citizenship are becoming the norm in ways both spectacular and mundane. There is not yet enough public discourse or agency in decision-making concerning these technologies and procedures, which are changing the conditions and experiences of politics. Working to intercede and counter such initiatives is crucial. Design experiments can support such direct action and contestation, and that is a line of inquiry I hope others will take up.

I believe it is also important to support, sustain, and amplify efforts that offer alternative modes of communal life. That has been the focus of the design experiments in civics that comprise this book. It is fair to ask whether or not such efforts will bring about change. A common critique of such efforts is that they do not bring about change. Another is that the change they bring about is limited or exclusionary. Yet another is that such efforts are simply folded back into hegemony. All of these critiques are fair. And yet I still maintain that such work is valuable. Take foraging as an example. Foraging will not solve food insecurity. There is simply not enough produce growing wild to feed all of those in need, and most people want more than fruit to subsist on. It is easy to dismiss foraging. But for the person at the shelter who is receiving that foraged apple or pear, it matters. It matters that they have fresh fruit and healthy food that they might not otherwise have. It also matters that someone cared enough to do the work to share that fruit. To dismiss foraging or other circumscribed efforts expresses a privileged position about what kind of action is meaningful. Resident-led data collection and counter-data action are other examples. Such practices will not undo decades of systemic racism or classism. But even though the effects of systemic racism and classism persist, it matters to residents that they can collect data about their communities that enables them to tell different stories about who they are and who they want to be, to advocate and care for themselves on their terms (Meng and DiSalvo 2018; Meng, DiSalvo, and Zegura 2019; Zegura, DiSalvo, and Meng 2018). Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) makes the argument that rejecting community economies because they are not viable against capitalism is, ironically, a fundamentally capitalocentric perspective, granting authority and destiny to a singular vision of economic life. The same can be said for civics and democracy broadly construed. Even though practices of communal life will not upend systemic racism and classism, solve food insecurity, or dismantle the regimes of big data, they offer the possibility for environments and moments that allow us to experience democratic conditions and care, if only in the small. Such experiences matter for those who participate in them.

### **Design Otherwise**

Projects such as those described in this book are comparatively uncommon in design. Much more familiar are projects like the Quayside in Toronto—projects with designers contributing to visions of the seamless integration

of public and private life through all manner of technologies. This is to be expected, given the relationship of design to industry. As Clive Dilnot (2015) argues, modern Western design was called into being by industry. Of course, then, the primary orientations of the field are going to be in relation to industry. This in and of itself is not a problem. Industry is an important component in society, and there is much that design can contribute to and through industry. But we are also in a moment in which free-market ideologies have become dangerous, oppressive, and pervasive. Practices and discourses of design that ground their purpose and meaning in producing value in free-market ideologies are misaligned to democracy. And such practices and discourses dominate design as we know it. Other approaches to design are needed. If we want to develop practices and discourses of design that find their purpose and meaning in participating in making other worlds possible, we need other theories, pedagogies, and cultures of design. As design practitioners and scholars, we need to contribute to expanding concepts of thinking and doing design otherwise—ways of designing that are not beholden to the standard histories and commitments of design and seek to proffer different subjectivities, endeavors, and purposes of making.

Beyond the democratic design experiments (Binder et al. 2015) that spurred this inquiry, ever more diverse modes of design are emerging that offer these needed theories, pedagogies, and cultures of design otherwise. These include critical fabulations (Rosner 2018), ecosocial design (Franz and Elzemberger 2016), design activism (Fuad-Luke 2013), design justice (Costanza-Chock 2020), data feminism (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020), transition design (Irwin, Kossoff, and Tonkinwise, 2015), and pluriversal design (Escobar 2018), among others. It is easy to get caught up in these labels and their differences, but what is vital and moving is what is common among them. What is common to many of these cultures of design is a commitment to engaged practice. Such practices locate their purpose and meaning in acts of collaboration, in the work of imagining, enabling, sustaining, and in some cases bringing into being ways of living together: born of the values and desires of those undertaking that collective work. Perhaps these acts and their outcomes have market value, but it is just as likely that they not. And whether or not they have market value does not define their significance.

Rather than trying to fit such work into our standard conceptions of design, perhaps it's best just to acknowledge that such work doesn't quite fit. It seems that when we try to meld such practices and commitments

together with free-market ideologies that characterize the contemporary institutions of design, what often emerges is lacking, at times pernicious (Irani 2019). I am also unconvinced that labeling such work as “public sector” is meaningful when the public sector is increasingly privatized. Moreover, as discussed in the introduction, all too often the work of government, and even civil society, is simply to reproduce governmentality as we know it (Julier and Kimbell 2019).

Just as it's fair to say that design has become an institution in contemporary society, it's also fair to say other designs are possible. And one of the tasks of research, theory, and criticism is to describe and articulate those other practices and discourses of design.

Several years ago I gave a talk on diverse civics and different models of design practice. One model cast the relationship between designers and communities in client terms. This was the most familiar model as it replicated design consultancies: the designer is outside of the community and is contracted to serve the community. Another model cast the designer as working from within a civil society organization. This model was also familiar as it replicated that of an in-house designer, a long-standing model in industry. The third model cast the relationship between the designer and communities in terms of the designer as an accomplice, drawing from activist practice (Indigenous Action Media 2014). This model generated excitement and confusion. It was unfamiliar. What seemed most difficult for the audience were the economics of this work and how it would fit with the familiar and formal institutions of design. Questions such as “Who will pay for this work?” and, perhaps more directly, “How will I get paid for this work?” jammed the conversation.

How to pay for such work and how to do such work in a way that is sustainable for all those involved *are* crucial questions. But herein is an irony. Designers take great pride in their capacity to reframe situations and practices. For the most part, however, throughout all that reframing, all that disruption and innovation of everything else, design itself is overlooked and accepted as what it has been and is. There are some, but comparatively few, attempts to differently consider the economic and social structures of design (Boehnert 2018; Elzenbaumer 2013; Julier 2017; Vlachokyriakos et al. 2018). So, while design may be an institution in contemporary society, what's needed are other institutions of design, both formal and informal.

Some of these institutions may need to be invented and made. At the same time, there are also many institutional forms that are *already* happening that we might learn from. To be clear, I am *not* suggesting that we need to disrupt or innovate design. Rather, we need to look to and humbly learn from other sites and practices of making and doing, in order to broaden our appreciation for who, what, and where design is and might be.

Here, once again, we can find inspiration and guidance in the work of Gibson-Graham. Just as Gibson-Graham argues that there are multiple economies, and that we need to acknowledge and appreciate diverse economies, and just as I have made a similar argument about civics, we might also make the same argument about design more broadly. There are multiplicities of design occurring, across varied sites. We know the dominant practices, discourses, and sites of design. These are the professions of design; they are formalized, expert, and market-driven. But by working outside the *de facto* institutions of design, in collaboration with others, we can broaden our understanding and appreciation of design and other modes of creative practice. This might, for instance, happen through working in collaboration with social movements (Costanza-Chock 2020; Ghoshal, Mendhekar, and Bruckman 2020), within solidarity economies (Vlachokyriakos et al. 2018), in artistic practices of noticing and unmaking (Jönsson et al. 2021), with collectives and cooperatives (Fox 2015; Jenkins 2017; Seravalli 2014), in the work of counterfeiters or forgers (Keshavarz 2018), in collaboration with Indigenous peoples and practices (Liboiron 2021), or from the critical pedagogies of the Global South (van Amstel and Gonzatto 2020). Such sites of design and their institutions are not necessarily antithetical to the dominant practices and discourses of design. Some exist in opposition, others are entangled, and most are compromised (Liboiron 2017; Shotwell 2016). What is meaningful and significant is to recognize that the sites and practices of design are numerous and varied, far beyond what is usually talked about when we talk about design, far beyond its professionalized practice as a service to industry, government, or civil society.

Design experiments in civics, then, are not a radical political practice, nor is care of the possible. As I have tried to address throughout this inquiry, design experiments in civics are modest. Their modest scale does not diminish their significance or value. Building from a pragmatist tradition, such work is essential to democracy: to explore conditions and experiences of conjoined action in an ongoing fashion. But design experiments are not

grand programs of massive political or social change. They do not claim to be, nor do they aspire to be. Where we might think of designed experiments in civics and care of the possible as radical is with regard to design itself. I'm leery of the implications of the term "radical," but I am drawn to the idea of the radical as that which gets to the root of things. I am not suggesting that design experiments in civics and care of the possible upheave design as we know it. Rather, I am suggesting that design experiments in civics and care of the possible contribute to thinking about how the roots of design might find different areas for growth. And one such area would be to consider democracy itself as the grounds for practice and discourse.

### A Commitment to Democracy

In the end, the reason to do these design experiments in civics comes down to a belief that they are an inherently worthy endeavor. Will our democratic institutions crumble without these experiments? No. But our experiences of democracy might be lacking. And I believe experiences that spark our interest and imagination, that provide us with capacities and desires for diverse communal life, contribute to the constant renewal of our democracies, making them more vibrant.

Through design experiments we come to know and inhabit civics differently. We also come to appreciate and practice design differently. We identify and express problems so that others might eventually address them more fully. We tinker to improve conditions, if only for the moment. Following in a pragmatist tradition, while also echoing the contestation characteristic of agonism, "there is no end-state at which we must work to arrive, but a multiple of possible future states which we seek and try out" (McKenna 2001, 83). Both design and democracy, in this sense, are process-oriented. They are undertakings that are ongoing, that find value in the action of that undertaking, in the *doing* of design and democracy. Care is similarly process-oriented. We continue to practice care, even as our actions fall short, even as our conditions are compromised, even as the goals we work toward fail to be realized. Care is not characterized by its "success." Yes, there are heroic stories of care. But there are many more stories of care that end in loss. Care brings varied and often uncomfortable affects into the practices and discourses of design. Care is stubborn—and even desperate.



In this way, we can also characterize these design experiments as hopeful. They are difficult; they are fragile, contingent, partial, and compromised. And they are hopeful. In each of the projects described in this book, those I collaborated with did their work and participated in these activities because, in varied ways, they found them worthwhile, both in the moment and toward something else beyond that moment. Much of this work is anticipatory: it looks to shape the conditions that it might grow into, with conviction but without assurances. As Rebecca Solnit (2016, xiv) puts it:

Hope is an embrace of the unknown and unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand.

To do design as democratic inquiry, to participate in design experiments, is to choose to pursue the work of democracy with fervor and hope. We choose to participate in design experiments in civics because we care about what the conditions and experiences of democracy might be for those with whom we act together. According to Jane Addams ([1902] 2002), for democracy to be meaningful and vibrant, we must choose to seek out diverse experiences with others. Democracy must be the product of social pursuits rather than isolated, individual decisions. And we must consciously choose to embrace conditions of difference and perplexity, to care for others even though doing so may not always be comfortable. We do design experiments in civics, then, because of a basic belief: contributing to imaginaries of communal life, and exploring practices that differently configure communal life, is necessary for democratic pluralism. Such work finds its roots not in markets or government but in an attachment and a commitment to democracy itself.

