

# Introduction

We live in the Age of Information. Key words and phrases are among the important tools we use to navigate the sea of research and data that surrounds us and alternately carries us forward or threatens to swamp us in a deluge of miscellaneous opinions and incoherent sets of facts. For this special issue of the journal devoted to Participatory Design, the list of appropriate key words and phrases includes: co-design, collaboration, mutual learning, situated design, opportunity-based change and infrastructuring design. The list neatly suggests the nature of Participatory Design as a form of design practice embedded in specific contexts and working with particular constituencies to envision viable and desirable alternatives to the status quo. What no list of words and phrases can do, no matter how evocative or novel, however, is to facilitate a better understanding and a nuanced appreciation of strengths and weaknesses of different design concepts and strategies. The editors of *DesignIssues* believe in the value of collecting the experiences and commentary of designers and design researchers who actively engage in developing new forms of design efforts like Participatory Design.

A special issue such as this brings before readers provocative ideas grounded in rigorous research, links research to practice (and vice versa), and calls to our attention best practices. Reading and reflecting upon the insights and discoveries of scholars and practitioners like those assembled for this issue by Toni Robertson and Jesper Simonsen provide the kind of foundation at which key-words can only hint. In their introduction, they describe the origins of these articles and provide a broad overview of the themes and organization of this special issue. They introduce the concept of Participatory Design as “the direct involvement of people in the co-design of tools, products, environments, businesses, and social institutions to ensure these work in ways that are more responsive to human needs.” They alert the reader both to the relationship with, and more significantly, the important distinctions between Participatory Design and other forms of design practice such as user-centered design and the design of Information Technologies.

We live in an age characterized by pressing economic, environmental and social problems, and at the same time, an age marked by great possibilities. Informed by the practices and the

values of Participatory Design designers can fulfill a crucial and exciting role in collecting the experience, harnessing the wisdom and envisioning the hopes and dreams of communities everywhere. What more noble form of professional service could we imagine for designers?

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