a welcome addition to a growing and important body of literature that will benefit many practitioner-scholars’ intent to persuasively articulate why good design is indeed good business.


2 Sabine Junginger and Jürgen Faust, eds., Designing Business and Management (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 3.

3 Ibid., 38.

Carl DiSalvo


Ezio Manzini’s _Design, When Everybody Designs_ should be required reading for practicing designers and design scholars working in social design or social innovation. Indeed, it may become one of the most important books describing a practice of design outside of the corporate mainstream since Victor Papanek and Buckminster Fuller’s _Design for the Real World_. Unlike Papanek and Fuller, however, Manzini is not divisive nor even really critical of contemporary design. Instead, he seems intent on producing a modern-day design dialectic, negotiating between the expert and non-expert, the market and nonmarket, the global and local.

The space of design that Manzini describes is at once vast and intimate. For him, the contemporary moment is one in which many of us have the opportunity and capacity “to design and redesign our existence” (3). There is something audacious in that statement. I might take affront to it, if it were not conveyed with such earnestness and accompanied by what is ultimately a humble vision. For Manzini, designing and redesigning our existence is precisely not a modernist grand narrative of total design. Instead, it is a series of informal endeavors, minor works of design, modest in effect. Rather than advocating for large-scale systems, the notion of design for social innovation that Manzini proffers is grounded in cosmopolitan localism: a “balance between the local and the open” (25) in which sites of engagement are active “nodes” in near and expansive networks.

The positions and flows of contemporary design for social innovation are encapsulated in Manzini’s Design Mode Map. On one axis is a distinction between design as problem solving and design as sense making. On the other axis is a distinction between expert design and diffuse design (meaning designing by non-experts). In the quadrants formed by the overlap of these axes are four sites of design: Design & Technological Agency, Design & Communication Agency, Cultural Activists, and Grassroots Organizations. At first this may seem like a simplistic model; in fact, with this map Manzini marks out topics in tension and primary settings for action and provides a means by which we might chart new ventures, moving along these axes and between these sites.

Almost half of the book falls under a section titled “Making Things Happen.” In the chapters in that section, Manzini moves back and forth across sites, expert and diffuse design, design as problem solving and as sense making. He provides glimpses of numerous projects, across more than a dozen themes. The lasting value of the book is found in these project descriptions—much more so than in the earlier chapters framing design and explaining social innovation. This is a significant description of projects from the perspective of design. Many of the kinds of projects are familiar—community gardens, informal economies, collaborative living. What is distinctive is the careful description of them as design projects, as projects in which design occurs and matters. From within these design-centric descriptions is revealed a vital argument of the book—the need to keep design relevant in a time when design thinking and innovation is everywhere.

Practicing designers will draw inspiration from these projects. For researchers, the benefit is in the framing of these projects—the categories of distinction that Manzini makes among them. However, there is an aspect of the work that is missing: some form of assessment. It is true that assessment of social innovation is difficult and often retreats into tired patterns of positivism to prove effect. It is true that assessment of social innovation is difficult and often retreats into tired patterns of positivism to prove effect. Even so, judgment is important in design work, perhaps
all the more so in social design work. How are we to judge this work? How are we to know if it is done well? How are we to support a claim for the value of design? Manzini begins to provide some answers in two chapters, “Collaborative Encounters” and “Making Things Effective and Meaningful.” In the first, he develops the Interaction Quality Map, which provides a way for placing and comparing experiences along a set of continuums between social tie strength and relational intensity. In the second, he proposes trust as a foundational theme, along with a series of other themes, including conviviality and sociality. In both chapters, what is offered is more descriptive than it is analytic. The challenge of assessing, in terms of evaluation or of critique, is still an open challenge for this kind of work. Perhaps these descriptive perspectives Manzini provides can be steps toward analytic tools and means of assessment, but that work is left to be done by other design researchers.

In addition to assessment as a pragmatic question to be addressed, there is a theoretical issue I find myself mulling over at the end of Design, When Everybody Designs: How do we understand social design and innovation in relation to critiques of neoliberalism? So many of the projects featured in the book are wonderful and express a sincere hopefulness. Yet these projects are undertaken in a context of dwindling social services in a time of increased need. What is or should be the work of social design in this context? Does the discourse of design for social innovation simply assuage the failures of social democracy? To be fair, these are not Manzini’s questions, and this is not a criticism of his book for not tackling those questions. But they are questions that we must attend to, and perhaps one final contribution of Design, When Everybody Designs, is that it provides practicing designers and design scholars with a basis from which to probe the limits and implications of social design and innovation.