Design Research for Change 2019 Symposium (DR4C)

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(Symposium Review)

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The organizers of Design Research for Change (DR4C) 2019—a two-day, single-tracked symposium held at London's Design Museum—set themselves the task of finding out what design researchers are changing globally and why. The overarching inquiry for this event (and accompanying published proceedings)[1] focused specifically on changes made in the broader areas of energy and the environment, education, public services, and health and social care. Although global design challenges were featured, what was most evident from the two-day event was that design research is itself in the process of changing.

Across the twenty symposium papers, spanning from innovations in indigenous weaving to detecting ship engine faults through tacit interfaces, two main themes emerge: (1) the design researcher and project participant relationship and the concern over the chasms that divide them; and (2) how designers perceive expertise and disagreement over what it might constitute. These themes problematize design as a discipline imbued with power and status.

The first theme was addressed usefully by design researcher Rachel Kelly. In "The Digitisation of Cordillera Weaving: Designing a New Oral Tradition," she observed the difficulties that non-design academics in her team had when engaging with communities of indigenous weaving traditions in the Cordillera region of the Northern Philippines. To bridge the gap with participants, Kelly chose to foreground craft practices by bringing fabrics to the participant meetings—the tactility and immediacy of which succeeded in sparking informal conversations between participants and researchers. Genuine dialogue emerged as an enabling condition for weaving relations that bridge the researcher–participant divide.

Meanwhile, design researchers Eva Knutz and Thomas Markussen emphasized that inappropriate methods can easily widen this divide. Their presentation, titled, "The Ripple Effects of Social Design," illustrated the challenges by sharing their pilot testing of a board game design that children could play during

visiting time with their fathers who were incarcerated in Danish prisons. The quantitative methods appended to the game's process by their criminologist collaborators resulted in alienating participants. The designers healed this rift by weaving questions about family into the gameplay itself, producing a dialogic interaction between children and fathers that they were more comfortable with and, in so doing, ensured their participation in the project.

Kelly, Knutz, and Markussen thus demonstrated that an approach to participant interaction needs to be appropriate to its context. Equally so does accessibility of content, as Ann Light's paper presentation revealed. I was entertained by Light's highly imaginative Counter-Factual World Generator in her workshop, with which she explored "activist futures" by inviting from participants their extrapolation of unfamiliar worlds should events in the distant past have taken a different turn. Light's workshops might have been pitched correctly so that her students could, for example, arrive at a world in which, intriguingly, "Brazil retains global control of rubber," or "the Pope owns all the electricity in Western Europe." However, Light's game design cast her too much as the Big Top impresario, causing workshop outcomes to be unduly dependent, as it appeared, on her own advanced intellectual capacities if not on those of her privileged participants. For practitioners of participatory design operating more inclusively, this raises concerns about who these world-generating interactions, verging on genteel parlor games, are likely to exclude. In a world riven with inequalities, it is those most disadvantaged by them who most urgently seek environments in which new worlds can be envisioned—less so those for whom this activity is experienced as an entertaining recreation.

In the presentation titled, "Metaphors and Imaginaries in Design Research for Change," Dan Lockton described his team's research as "tangible thinking" invested in the vital work of supporting people who are willing to talk about things that are difficult to talk about. Sharing design prototypes for workshop materials—a vocabulary of shapes cut out from card—Lockton showed how participants (his students) could deploy these in composing physical models representative of their own emotional states. The implied contribution being that this method could provide an expanded vocabulary to those challenged by and struggling to make sense of mental health conditions. One delegate took umbrage, arguing that mental health "can't simply be addressed by ideas." The accusation suggested that Lockton's pedagogical practice came across as depoliticized—as blind to power structures. The contrast was especially evident in light of the presentations by Light and Kelly, who both had fuelled an appetite from the symposium's delegates for design activism.

Across the two days, a tension was born out of conflicting

views between delegates over what counts as "expertise." The majority of delegates appeared to embrace an inclusive notion of expertise, founded on an openness to many forms of knowledge, while a minority appeared to view this openness as a weakness.

By far the least equivocal paper in the symposium was presented by Fernando Galdon—a Royal College of Art PhD candidate. The paper, titled "The Ontological Nature of Design: Prospecting New Futures Through Probabilistic Knowledge," was forthright in its call for the designer as expert. He argued that designers must be experts of *future preparedness* because "*probabilistic* knowledge [is what] distinguishes design from other disciplines." Galdon's presentation clarifies that he and co-researcher Ashley Hall have a problem with design's focus on the *present*. Critical design, participatory design, and social design are "tying design to the present," and this focus implies "the dissolution of design as a discipline," preventing it "from being recognized as an independent domain." Without its probabilistic concerns and expertise, "design becomes secondary and is subjected to other disciplines' rules and mindsets."

Galdon's protestations for design independence verged on a protectionist perspective compared to some presenters, who wholly embraced interdependency and the significance of design in other fields and who saw the dissolution of design into other practices as a boon. For example, in "So, What Do You Do? The Role of Design Research in Innovation for Worklife Inclusion," Lise Amy Hansen spoke of instituting in her trans-disciplinary team a "disruptive group" of designers and researchers to ask difficult questions, so that team members were not "tripped up by... their own learned practices [upon] entering new fields." In addition, in a presentation titled "The Future of Seafaring: Designing an On-board User-Interface to Predict Engine Faults on Marine Vessels," Simone Gumtau spoke of being challenged to help "non-experts" whose tacit knowledge allowed them to more easily spot faults in ship engines. Gumtau's interface design translated the engine fault signal back to its original vibrational analog state, so that the signal could be felt by hand on a dashboard touchpad. The mechanism made explicit what "non-experts" recognized intuitively in tacit form. Finally, Laura Salisbury, in "Wearing Your Recovery: 3.0," explored the feedback loops of garment–body dialogue in people undergoing stroke rehabilitation, focusing particularly on rehabilitation in upper limbs. She and her research colleagues observed that, through continued use, garments become "records of lived experience." As such, they represent an imprint of a "hard-to-reach expertise"—Hansen's term for the embodied knowledge of her co-design project participants, who were young people with developmental and intellectual disabilities. Involving and engaging them in co-design, Hansen discovered, requires a focus on performativ-

ity and practices—the dissolution of design into *everyday* practices such as getting to work including waiting for the bus—"where knowledge is embedded and expressed in the doing."

Panellist Laura Santamaria, whose earlier talk was titled "The Fair Energy Mark in the Making: Framing a Citizen-Led Campaign by Participatory Design," and her partner in the citizen-led campaign, Paul Amuzie, contended that power is built within communities through peer relationships. They reminded delegates that achieving these partnerships requires facilitation (by design researchers) of fair and just "processes that reveal [the community members] who know the issues and are prepared to back them." During the plenary panel discussion, just at the moment when more delegates were warming to the benefits of design's dissolution and broadening their definition of "expertise" (beyond Galdon's narrower understanding) to include facilitation, a dissenting voice spoke up from the audience: "Don't beat yourself up too much," the voice advised, advocating instead for the "powerful [expert] role of designers as educators." At this point, Santamaria retorted, "even when we are facilitating, we are experts." In speaking for power-shedding and the management of an even distribution of power as a form of expertise, Santamaria's swift response exposes a limited conception of expertise privileged as exclusively power-wielding that Galdon had made fervent appeals for earlier, and over which much consternation had been squandered.

During the past forty years, design research has changed markedly; the ultimate message from this symposium is that more change is yet to come—and perhaps more quickly than originally anticipated. Numerous global design challenges are emerging from the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Design researchers seeking out others beyond their field with whom to work, to access a "hard-to-reach expertise"—that which is grounded in lived experience, is by definition outside of design and outside of what is traditionally recognized as expertise—are loosening their ties with a singular kind of autonomy, often associated with the Global North, and are now becoming acquainted with a more collective spirit that tends to emanate from the Global South. Delegate comments indicated that some see this migration as a regrettable tale of stepping back, of shedding power; while for others, it comes as a challenging, yet intriguing, process of unlearning—one that demands new frameworks, new tools, and the re-politicizing of their practice.