Re-Shaping Design for a world of contested priorities

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Executive statement

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have an opportunity and responsibility to make design for social innovation more accessible and effective. HEIs can act as neutral anchor institutions that support different forms of human-centred, relational, and responsible design. This brief recommends that new policies are needed to create the conditions for this new type of design, both at the level of individual engagement and at the level of scaling up knowledge exchange across place-based social innovation initiatives. The brief highlights the Responsible Innovation Hub as an example of such a policy initiative.

Key message and recommendations

Design is valuable for social innovation. However, common (mis)understandings of design in this context are often of design tools that facilitate small acts of collaborative creativity. This is problematic because it ignores the interconnectedness of our most pressing challenges that can be better addressed with alternative forms of design. To respond to this problem, the following are recommended:

- Establish Design at a regional scale with social change initiatives engaged with as prototypes.
- Develop mechanisms that allow for a fluid transfer of knowledge and support different levels and timeframes of engagement.
- Progressively develop spaces for design encounters across physical and digital places to enhance civic engagement.
- Produce sharable learning about how different publics construct concerns that matter to them, navigate their disputes, and bring about new forms of action for purposeful change.

The reduction of Design for Social Innovation

For over a decade, design thinking has been recognised as valuable for social innovation. The claim is that design thinking, by working with diverse stakeholders, produces high-impact solutions to social problems as a bottom-up approach. The application of design thinking in social and public contexts has the defining features of being human-centred and iterative. Tools are used to better understand the needs of people and as a result produce solutions, such as policies, services and products, that are better suited to meet those needs. Arriving at a solution is part of an iterative process where prototyping supports a creative investigation into plausible possibilities and offers material helpful when seeking feedback from diverse stakeholders. Increased awareness and application of these approaches is helping more individuals and organisations to address social problems and improve public goods. Design approaches can be found in national and regional government, public sector organisations, in addition to the voluntary sector, and regional and local entrepreneurship support mechanisms.

Social innovation is happening across the world as passionate people make positive differences to their communities. Often where design is used in these contexts it is mobilised through the provision of training, workshops, methods, tools, and templates. These components are frequently provided at a price, or via free products which were originally produced to meet commercial needs. These can be useful in bringing diverse groups of people together but work frequently takes the shape of discrete design activities, led by an individual or a group as a one-off project. In recognising that designing takes place in many different settings by people who are not 'professional designers' design can be reduced to a tool kit of resources applied with different levels of thoughtfulness, thoroughness, and contextual sensitivity.

However, there are a variety of approaches for interacting with and responding to complex socio-material contexts. These include but are not limited to design thinking, service design, communication design, co-design, systems design, transition design, social design, participatory design, relational design, and design futures. Each approach has its own history, theory, precedent, and integrity and materialises as situated in its relationship to people and place. With very few exceptions, understanding how to access this knowledge, integrate it within existing communities and have it meaningfully contribute to purposeful positive social change is not possible. This means that individual initiatives, local communities, and regions are constantly initiating a place-based design capability and knowledge base and not building this strategically as part of an infrastructure. This is problematic as it is costly and inefficient, and our communities and regions are losing out on enhanced outcomes resulting from a more connected, generative, and ongoing approach.

What we discovered through Shiine

Through the SHIINE project we worked with people from 23 countries across Europe to understand social innovation through accounts of social change initiatives. Accounts were collected to help us better understand the complexities and challenges of making social change happen (or trying to). Each social change account demonstrated the involvement of different kinds of stakeholder in responding creatively to an urgent social need. The collection of accounts is rich and diverse and while very few understood their endeavour as an act of design, we discovered elements sitting across the accounts that help to structure a way of thinking about 'design for social change' and 'design of environments of social change'.

Design can be utilised to support the engagement of groups and individuals who are often left out of decision making and can enhance the quality of participation in public discourse. Practices of design, in complex social settings, can allow groups to explore disagreements and constructively grapple with existing norms and institutional conditions which resist or make social change difficult or unviable. Furthermore, the work demonstrates how social change initiatives can be understood as prototypes for decentred social design. By treating them as such we can establish more sophisticated support for designing *in* contexts while modifying mechanisms and platforms to support the designing *of* contexts for broader changes in governments and societies (Spencer & Bailey, 2020).

Environments are needed where people are helped to understand what they are designing, what they can influence and what they can't. While this might happen in spaces like Public Sector Innovation labs, HEIs offer a unique position as a neutral anchor institution as a site coordinating design expertise for place based social innovation. Initiatives like the collaborative environment of Northumbria University's Responsible Design Innovation group and its new Responsible Innovation Hub are demonstrating how engagements across public, private, and civic contexts can be productively supported by design and the academy. Launched in 2023, the Responsible Innovation Hub is an open community supporting design journeys to address systemic difficulties and establish fairer futures. The Hub develops collaborative environments for design journeys that reveal systems. Through collaborative social action, the Hub, supports the visualisation of systemic and dynamic settings for societal challenges foregrounding the difficult decisions we face amongst competing factors and compelling priorities. A central action of the Hub is identifying and challenging patterns of practices and behaviour that maintain problematic system structures.

Recommendations

Design can and does support social innovation. However, we do not need more template and post-it-note versions of design tools. We need to make the depth and variety of design approaches work as part of the fabric of our regional communities. In doing so we can more productively support active citizenship while learning and developing how regions equitably design themselves as they navigate and respond to global challenges which manifest as place-based concerns. These recommendations can be embedded within regional development strategy in collaboration with institutions or collectives with a remit for offering national strategic advice for design (e.g., UK Design Council). National and Regional Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a responsibility for these recommendations to make design for social innovation more accessible and effective.

Recommendation 1: Fluid and flickering

Establish mechanisms that coordinate different actors and institutions to position themselves in relation to different scales, intensities, timeframes, and concerns in regional social innovation. Mechanisms should support the fluid transfer and generation of knowledge through the formation of temporary collections of disciplinary, organisational, and lived expertise and action. Collections of expertise and action engaged in this new form of design would flicker as different organisations and individuals demonstrate leadership and act on shared areas of interest, while others take a more observant or critical role. Engagement of a set of anchor institutions for this design expertise is required to build this mechanism.

Recommendation 2: Open and without a fixed shape

Barriers to enter these regional social innovation constellations of expertise and action must be identified and addressed to allow resource and time weak individuals and organisations to engage, benefit from and contribute to the social change work. Community assets should be utilised to support this ambition and leadership should be encouraged from across the economic, social, and cultural diversity within a place so that this mechanism changes its shape as it develops.

Recommendation 3: Productive and curious

Design is about curiosity, action, and consequences. Social change initiatives should be understood so that learning about how we construct social challenges, deal with disputes and how action relates to what exists in a place can drive an ongoing designing of a place that is better equipped for social change.

Acknowledgements

More information

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