Mapping the political economy of design: Designing the Ecocene

[Abstract]

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Mapping the Political Economy of Design: Designing the Ecocene

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Design is problem-solving practice-based discipline that draws on a variety of disciplinary traditions to construct new ways of living with new communications, products, spaces, buildings, systems and services. The approach to knowledge nurtured by the assorted design disciplines (communication design, product design, architecture, service and system design, interaction design, fashion design, etc.) includes an understanding of generative processes along with the various ways that design establishes function and encourages new behaviours. Sustainable design theorists interrogate the social and environmental consequences of design. While progress towards sustainability agendas is evident across the various design disciplines, progress is not happening at a sufficient scale or rate to address the most severe global challenges. In earlier work, I have described how the political economy itself thwarts efforts by individual designers to design sustainable ways of living (Boehnert 2014; 2018). Likewise, sustainable design theorist David Orr claims that sustainability is not in the particular techniques of design, which have become very sophisticated, but in the haphazard structures – economic, political, social – in which design occurs, which slows the effort to take ecological design to the necessary scale. The rules of the system permit change only at the margins, which is to say only slight adjustments in the coefficients of change but none at the level of social structures and system design... To really improve the human prospect the precepts of ecological design must inform politics, governance, law, and economics (2018, 8).

This is the line of the thinking that informs the ‘Mapping the Political Economy of Design’ research project. The reproduction of unsustainable design practice due to the priorities of the political economy of design is the starting point for this project.

The project will use mapping methods to investigate the research questions. Do the rules and priorities ‘designed into’ the economic system reflect current understanding of the environmental and social sciences? What types of values, practices and behaviours are encouraged and rewarded by the design of this economic system? What are the implications of these values and priorities? Where are the possible leverage points that can affect systems change in the political economy of design? While these questions are still marginal in the design industry, many designers and theorists suggest design can be an important leverage point for sustainability transitions. But the transformative potential of design depends on the depth of its engagement with ecological thought and subsequently the ability of designers to harness a new ecologically ontology, epistemology and ethic for the transformation of the systems that determine what is designed. The Ecocene concept (Boehnert 2018) describes an era of where the generation of new futures is driven by this ecologically aware and critically engaged perspective that enables a redesign of the systems that determine what is designed.

The ‘Mapping the Political Economy of Design’ project will use system oriented design methods (SOD) to make flows and structures visible. The research project will approach the political economy of design as a complex adaptive system that can be modelled and mapped as a means of understanding its basic structure, to study its system dynamics and explore sites for interventions. SOD uses knowledge mapping strategies to help interdisciplinary groups to explore complexity by visualising relationships and context across various scales and domains. These mapping techniques illustrate systemic processes such as flow and feedback with stylized representations that can help to identify tensions within dynamic processes. These methods will help the research group map the construction of value and values by design.
I will use previous ecological and feminist models of economic processes as a starting point for the mapping processes. Kate Raworth’s Embedded Economy (figure 1) visualises four economic domains: market, household, state and commons in a socially and ecologically embedded economy (2017). Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham’s The Iceberg model (figure 2) displays a selection of economic processes supporting market activities (2006). The explicit theorisation of alternative economies opens space for an exploration of how design can cultivate alternative types of value and different values than those prioritised by market activities. The research aims to encourage the design of new projects to develop structures that will work with, rather than against, ecological circumstances. Using feminist and ecological economic theories, the research will also serve to develop a stronger socio-economic theory of design. This abstract describes the theoretical basis of the early stages of an interpretivist research project that will map challenges and opportunities for the design of interventions towards a redirected, regenerative and distributive economy. The research will provide an overview of the economic dynamics that are relevant to designers concerned with sustainability and analysis that can lay foundation for an emergent Ecocene.

Figure 1 Embedded Economy. (Raworth 2017) [modified by author].
Figure 2 The Iceberg, drawn by Ken Byrne. (Gibson-Graham, 2006, pp. 70).

References