

Community + Culture features practitioner perspectives on designing technologies for and with communities. We highlight compelling projects and provocative points of view that speak to both community technology practice and the interaction design field as a whole. — **Christopher A. Le Dantec, Editor**

Civic Design

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Elections in former superpowers have brought about dramatic shifts in geopolitical power and position. Social movements on the left, right, and center are all active in visible and shifting ways. Capacities for action are changing as well, due at least partly to changes in technologies and access to technologies. It is within these messy conditions that civic design operates.

Over the past year, several important articles have appeared in these pages about the intersection between interaction design and civics: service-learning approaches to interaction design pedagogy; new graduate programs that take a deeply situated approach to creating civic designers; theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches to guide how and what designers and researchers might produce in a broadly defined civic space [1,2,3,4]. We find these developments exciting, not least because we feel very much a part of this movement toward developing the teaching and professionalization of civic design. But also because the stakes are high when designing experiences that mediate civic life.

When we talk about civic life—and the products of civic design—we take a broad view that extends far beyond the familiar rituals of democratic participation (important as they are) and instead focuses on the mundane daily interactions of interacting with neighbors, dealing with municipal bureaucracies, and forming or working in community groups. Across these

areas, we are careful of how we think about civic interactions and the valorization of participation that often comes baked into our assumptions of what counts as civic.

Much of this is ground covered by our friends and colleagues in the articles mentioned earlier. No less, they have provided thoughtful and exciting approaches to how we train future interaction designers to consider and weigh trade-offs between participation and resistance, collective and individual action, and privileged moments of democratic participation and the tedium of established bureaucracies. Building from the kinds of considerations involved in developing a design-training program around the civic space, we want to ask: What kinds of grand challenges should the theories, methods, programs, and professional practices of civic design be organizing around? Within this question are sets of questions around how we approach what it means to “do civics”: How do we understand access, privilege, participation, resistance,

and a relationship to the status quo? The other set of concerns is about the products of civic design and what happens when designers, through those products, play the role of the state: deciding who gets access to what features under what conditions and to what effect.

To begin to sketch out the landscape of what civic-design grand challenges look like, we want to consider three beacons that shape what it means to do civic design or be a civic designer.

WHAT DOES A CIVIC DESIGNER NEED TO KNOW?

The first beacon has to do with the knowledge needed by designers working in a civic capacity. Civic design aims to do more than develop communications, products, and services in support of existing organizations, doing the work they’ve always done. Rather, civic design aims to contribute to new forms of living together. This is why research is crucial. It is not enough to streamline existing processes; what is needed is the discovery and invention of new modes of organizing and action. Methods of design inquiry are particularly well suited to this because design is fundamentally about that which has yet to exist. Whether we label it constructive or critical, design is differentiated from most other modes of research that study things as they are; instead, design considers how things might be.

Of course, design cannot take on civics alone—it may not even be the place of design to lead. Whatever “the civic” is, regardless of political position,

Insights

- Civic design is a collective affair, informed by a multiplicity of fields, methods, and theories.
- The civic designer is an embedded accomplice and will need to consider new ways of working with communities, government and non-government agencies, and all manner of civil society.
- Civic design will need to be critical about participation, resistance, and a variety of modes of engagement.



it is a collective affair. Civic design should likewise be a collective affair, informed by a multiplicity of fields, methods, theories, and histories. This may be one reason why civic design projects and programs seem to be flourishing in diverse institutions—places where different fields, methods, and theories intermingle without the drag of tradition or discipline. The liberal arts, broadly construed, are especially significant as we engage civics. Theories of democracy, sovereignty, citizenship, and, above

all, power, must inform civic design. Moreover, we must recognize and appreciate that these theories are neither formulaic nor singular. Whatever democracy is, and whatever

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citizenship is, they are multiple and contested; power is not an algorithm that accounts for freedom and control, but rather an extension of historic and structural effect and affect.

Philosophy, history, literature, communications, and media studies are important touchpoints for conceptualizing how we might structure our lives together differently. As we think about educating designers to work in this domain, it becomes apparent that we need to broaden our curriculum. This is already happening



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in places like the digital media program at Georgia Tech (our home), at Emerson, at Newcastle University, and certainly others we may have inadvertently omitted. If a valid concern of civic design is that designers begin playing the role of the state, then the training of those designers must transcend the technical and material mastery of human-computer interaction, data science, and engineering psychology. The challenge for design education in more traditionally technical institutions that train HCI professionals is to make a turn toward the liberal arts: If every liberal arts student needs to learn to program, then every programmer (and designer) needs to learn the liberal arts.

WHAT MUST A CIVIC DESIGNER DO?

The civic designer will also need to consider new modes of encounter—new ways of working with communities, with government and non-government agencies, with all manner of civil society, and even (perhaps especially) with those who work beyond our normal conceptions of what is appropriate or civil action. Indeed, one of the activities of discovery and invention that we need to pursue is to rethink and remake our research methods. Much can be drawn here from participatory action research (PAR) and those within design and HCI who have led the way in bringing PAR to bear on work in these fields. The central concern here is twofold: first, that civic design projects derive from their local context, in which the individuals and groups working toward their own outcomes determine what needs to be explored and created through design (local here might mean national or international—it's simply the frame within which people are working); second, that the assessment of good design, or effective systems, rests again on the situated groups' judgment of whether and to what degree the artifacts advanced their cause. These represent a shift, in particular for some design practices where problem setting, solving, and assessing rest primarily on the professional practices, material mastery, and aesthetic judgments of highly trained individuals. We are not arguing that trained design acumen is

irrelevant, simply that for a system to be well designed for the civic context, the role of designer must play out with deference and humility.

The deference and humility that come from perspectives in PAR mean civic design requires an embeddedness that other forms of product design do not. Shared across the nascent programs in civic design and civic media are deeply collaborative partnerships with nonprofits, municipalities, and other civic organizations. These partnerships place designers into the field and demand a kind of civic activism. Whether addressing the mundane challenges of creating digital services for staid bureaucracies, or taking radical action to confront and dismantle systemic oppression and injustice, the measure of effect and the ability to act through design rests in building lasting and robust local relations in place. At a minimum, civic design means being an ally, but more often it means becoming an accomplice (wittingly or not) [5].

Attuning how we do design in civic contexts also means revisiting the tenets of design thinking. Perhaps most glaringly, in the context of civic design, to what extent is the notion of empathy still appropriate? It certainly makes sense when we imagine the client-designer relationship common to industry, where empathizing with the client (or the client's customer) helps create insight into product innovation. But it's not at all clear that empathy is an appropriate frame of reference for a committed and engaged civic designer, because empathy suggests an otherness. But if the civic designer is engaged as an accomplice, empathy loses its relevance. In the place of methods for developing empathy, then, we need to consider methods for developing a sense of *belongingness*, a sense of mutual commitment, while not glossing over the inherent power relations at play in any project.

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Finally, the civic designer needs a different set of guiding metaphors. Reliance on neoliberal relations that mask political configuration and exclusion as natural forces need to be displaced; likewise, simple critiques of neoliberalism without deep involvement with communities of interest should be recognized as the acts of privilege they are. What these metaphors are is still an open question. But it is increasingly clear that the discourses of efficiency and data-driven insight that motivate much of contemporary civic tech are failing to provide conceptual frames that actually speak to our lived conditions.

WHAT ARE CIVIC DESIGN CHALLENGES?

With the need to both rethink what designers need to know and what they need to do within a civic context, we can begin tracing out several challenges that face civic design. These are areas we have encountered through our own work and that point to larger classes of problems around which civic design might form a large-scale agenda. This list should grow and evolve as we mature our efforts around practicing and studying design in, and as, civics.

Rethinking service relations.

Many municipalities are turning to interaction design as a way to reshape public administration around improved customer service. This notion, that the public consumes services provided by municipalities and local governments, is consistent with the market-is-all move of neoliberalism, but undermines key attributes of civic encounters—namely that cities are not composed of services, but rather of people who live in them. Shifting our focus from city as service to city as collective or commons has important implications on everything from how we interact with elected and professional officials, to how we conceive and implement smart city programs. By framing the city as a collection of civic relations, of which customer-provider is just one among many, we can begin to address different kinds of accountabilities, whether those take the shape of processes, instrumented infrastructures, or data-driven decision making.

Enabling non-participation, non-compliance. Much of the design work within the domain of civics has been focused on increasing participation. But shouldn't communities have the right to not participate? What of those situations where the "opportunity" to participate is meaningless, or worse, where participation validates the mere appearance of openness without any matching commitment to backing that appearance with action? Similarly, how can civic designers support activities of non-compliance, those sorts of actions in which our partners decide to explicitly and purposefully flout procedures, regulations, and laws?

Understanding the breadth of "community engagement." The foil to enabling non-participation and non-compliance as legitimate modes of civic encounter is the need to understand a breadth of practices and goals around community engagement. Sometimes such practices are simply one-way information sharing; at other times, they mean deeply participatory processes with shared agency and accountability. Moving between these poles means civic designers need to take care and develop nuanced process interventions, interaction techniques, and system affordances so that engagement as political expedient is not confused with engagement as deeply participatory process.

Opportunities beyond academia.

If we look to the spread of civic design, digital civics, and civic media programs, it would seem many students are drawn to this work. But what will this education prepare them for? There is still a lack of opportunity for professional civic designers. Few studios or consultancies specialize in this work, and there are limited opportunities across civil society organizations. As educators, we also need to become advocates and develop professional opportunities for our students. For many of us, this is unfamiliar work. And yet, if we don't do so, students will soon look elsewhere for their careers.

The goal across these challenges is to build an agenda of civic design capable of recognizing and embracing contentious politics. It is precisely those

contentious politics that enable us to produce the communities—urban or rural—in which we live. The current assumptions around rationalized service delivery and responsive customer service work to omit conflict by black-boxing decisions and process behind data, algorithms, and technical problem solving. Opening these up so that they may be understood, contested, and remade through collective and public efforts is fundamental to civic design. To move in this direction, to contribute to the invention of new modes of belongingness and togetherness, requires that we begin doing, teaching, and researching design differently, and this too is a collective affair, requiring new coalitions of researchers, practitioners, and organizations.

ENDNOTES

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