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Socialising design? From consumption to production

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The notion that design should be socially engaged has become an article of architectural faith, but it is not always clear what we want from design in social terms, or what the social should do or be within design processes. In the discussion that follows, I consider some of the core ways in which ideas of the social inform the field of spatial design. Debates over social architecture are frequently concerned with alternative and activist approaches to the practice of design, and the papers in this collection take up in critical mode a range of right-thinking and left-leaning interventions which are committed to social ends, processes and values. There is a strong orientation in this field to low-income urbanism as the crucible for socialised design – in contexts where the 'social' may be the chief or only resource in conditions of state under-capacity and capital indifference. My focus, however, is less on avowedly engaged practices of spatial design than on the social dimensions of more orthodox – and generally more powerful – designs on space. The initial aim is to call out the versions of the social implicated in mainstream design and development in rich-world settings. Such an account begins with the social sites in which design projects take place, and the social uses to which the latter are geared. The larger aim of the discussion, however, is to go beyond a concept of the social as the context or the object of design to think more critically about the *social relations of production* which shape design as a process and produce space as a design outcome.

Most commonly, the social is brought into design thinking and practice in terms of use – who is being designed for, and for what purpose? Such a focus clearly is central for any project of 'socialising design', but can reduce to a thin sense of the social as the end-point or audience – a kind of contextual cladding – for design practice. Socialising design in an extended sense means taking more seriously relations of design production. Spatial design is a matter of social concern not only in its orientation towards potential users but as a set of social processes in itself, one which includes a complex field of social actors variously

involved in the work of design. To put it simply, if a focus on social use centres on the consumption stage of design processes, my aim is to underline the production aspects of spatial design – and not simply in terms of involving ‘users’ in gestures of collaboration or co-production. Seeing the social in this ways is about expanding the critical understanding of design processes and who is engaged in them, opening onto a broader design politics which takes in issues of work, agency and equity.

1. Consuming design: the social as use

Design’s relation to the social conventionally is framed in terms of uses and users. This is true both for overtly ‘social’ approaches to design and within mainstream development processes. Indeed, the fact that physical design and development is so consequential for everyday social lives makes a distinction between architecture which is socially engaged and that which (presumably) isn’t somewhat beside the point: the making of space is always a shaping of social possibilities, such that the difference between engagement and disengagement may be more a matter of how explicit you are about your social intentions, and how much you care about them. It is easy enough to think about instances of *anti*-social design: built forms and spaces that repulse interaction, which atomise and isolate, which discipline movement and access, which exclude or expel, which do not allow for sitting or loitering (or even for looking) – whether as an effect of the design brief or as an unintended outcome of other design objectives. Given the impossibility of undertaking spatial designs without producing social effects, it is striking how single-minded some buildings and spaces appear in repelling or simply ignoring their social environments: in blank façades that buffer out the street; in the creation of barriers and blockages in public or transitional spaces; in corporate or ‘cultural’ or residential building typologies that look the same whether they are erected in Moscow or Manila or Manchester. Easy enough, too, to think of the poorly-socialised design that is characteristic of so much high-end architecture – object buildings in love with their own shapes but little concerned with what goes on around them. Self-regard of this sort seems symptomatic of a kind of dissociative design disorder which sets built forms in place in attitudes of profound detachment.

These anti-social impulses in design are, of course, social positions in themselves. From private buildings which run unrelieved blank walls along the street or retreat behind defensive gates, to disciplinary public buildings with internal gating, security screens and thickets of cameras; from the electronic signature of elite designs which can be digitally copied across different spatial and cultural contexts, to the banal brutalism of anti-homeless studs and spikes: designs such as these involve often tacit but always thoroughly *social* premises about how much, if at all, context matters; about who should have access, and on what terms; about how people should interact in a given place and what they can do while they're in it. Where a concern with the social is more obviously factored into mainstream practice, design tends to be something that is *applied* to the social; an encounter between a technical sphere of practice, a managerial concern with delivery, and a set of social aims, actors and environments. Such a stylisation is particularly evident in settings where public authorities and professional cultures require certain gestures of social accountability, and where private developers may be obliged to comply with (and pay for) these requirements. Too easily the social is reduced to a bleak or boosterist human back-story for spatial intervention, to scripted forms of consultation or participation, or to an increasingly standard repertoire of socially-approved design moves offered as add-ons to the more serious business of getting your development built.

On the consumption side of design interventions, we might read these stylisations of the social in a number of related ways: in terms of context, use, object, and process. The following schema simplifies and separates out these terms to highlight some of the primary modes in which the social is positioned on the receiving end of design processes.

i. the social as context

In the most basic sense, the social defaults to the setting in which design takes place. In the simplest version of design demography, individuals are mocked-up as that cast of strolling players who populate architectural visualisations the world over. Absorbed in the human stage business that gives this scenography an effect of animation, the architectural avatar represents our best *al fresco* selves; where everyone is outside, it never rains and nobody smokes. These bland fantasies of designed lives are shadowed by other versions of the social as a context for regeneration, for design as improvement. In this developmental logic,

social context is depicted as the problematic or potential human environment which spatial interventions will seek to address. A different set of representations go to work in this register, including census data, indices of deprivation, unemployment and crime statistics, and a bleaker visual imagery of disadvantage and disorder (see Wacquant, Slater and Pereira 2014). Such an approach to social context might be seen as the 'before' shot to the soft social short-hand of much architectural visualisation; neither depart from the notion that the social is what goes on *around* projects of design. In its decorative or diagnostic modes, the social as context provides a more or rather less scenic backdrop for design interventions, a set of conditions to be addressed or ameliorated, or an imagined, 'activated' future.

ii. the social as use

In a second and closely related sense, the social refers to the uses for which various designs are intended. Such a concern is a necessary part of any socially-engaged design practice, but it is important to recognise the 'uses of use' within more orthodox approaches to design and development, and how these work to standardise the social in a prescribed range of functions and activities. A significant part of design specifications has to do with projections of use: the provision of common space or the number of bedrooms in residential schemes, the floorplates of offices, the share of town centre developments given to car parking, assumptions around building lifespans – all of these involve calculations about consumption which in turn create conditions for and limits to actual use. None of this may appear very 'social' in the language of the brief, but they design in possibilities of use and prophecies about users that will tend to be self-fulfilling. Dominant modes of urban design and development working at large scales and larger profit margins have very real consequences for social arrangements and interactions while rendering the social in terms of normalised patterns of use and putative consumer 'demands'.

To suggest, here, that design is one technical means for making up the social is to put a conceptual spin on the development axiom that supply creates its own demand, in property markets which provide little real choice about how individuals or households want to live, work, consume or move. The figure of the end-user remains one of the most tenacious mystifications in current design discourse. It provides a final cause for design processes that

are directed towards these notional users, when the latter's interests (in particular types of housing, in certain transport choices, or in various sites and practices of consumption) might just as well be understood as development specifications *for* demand. This is not to suggest that the category of use or the figure of the user is not a valid – indeed, a prime – social concern for designers and their critics (see Cupers 2013). But insofar as the social is relegated to the point of consumption within prevailing approaches to development, the user appears as both alibi and afterthought in prefab and supply-driven designs for social life.

iii. the social as object

There is a sharper sense in which the social can be understood as an object to be shaped by strategies of design; not only in terms of general patterns of use but in more specific determinations about it. Human conduct and social interaction become tractable in design terms through weaker and stronger versions of behavioural steering: in formats for public seating or way-finding; in the compulsory conviviality of income and tenure 'mixing'; in crowd control measures and strategies of spatial pacification or crime prevention. Forty years ago, the sociologist Herbert Gans – who had a second string in planning – warned that the social 'cannot be remade through architecture and architects cannot solve problems of poverty, mental illness, or marital discord through better design' (although, one might interject, they can probably make all these things worse). 'Nor', he went on, 'can they shape friendship choices, civic participation, community identity or social cohesion through site planning' (Gans 1977, 28). This hasn't stopped planners and policy-makers from trying; the desire to produce social outcomes from physical designs remains a live one, even if the heavy hand of social planning has given way in recent years to the ostensibly lighter touch of 'nudge'. Indeed, the association of social engineering with modernist design and planning gives something of a free pass to the post-paternalism of liberal urban regimes which seek to shape public conduct and regulate social interactions in space; whether in encouraging you to walk to the bus-stop or in discouraging you from lying down once you get there (see Jones, Pykett and Whitehead 2010). To design spaces and forms is always to *design in* certain uses and design out others. Modernist design has no monopoly on the attempt to steer social outcomes, and there is a reason why the expert nudgers and shapers promoted

by certain strands of behavioural economics are called ‘choice architects’ (see Thaler, Sunstein and Balz 2010). Indeed, they may often *be* architects.

iv. the social as process

Conventional efforts to ‘socialise’ design, lastly, go to work on process and procedure. This is most evident in efforts to integrate non-expert actors and knowledge into design processes through strategies of engagement and participation. The argument that design should involve consultation or collaboration with prospective users or interested bystanders is well-established, as are criticisms of how this generally works in practice. Anodyne routines of user engagement offer therapeutic diversions from the demolition flow-chart for planned developments, but rarely disrupt them. Part of the problem lies in a limited definition of a consultation ‘process’ as a series of formulaic motions geared to particular ends, rather than understanding process as something which might be open-ended or undecided in advance. The fact of having done consultation is what matters; that it might change anything is to be treated more as a planning risk than a design opportunity (see Douglas and Parkes 2016; see also Lee, McQuarrie and Walker 2015; McQuarrie 2013).

A further part of the problem is the reflexive way in which the social, in this mode, is figured in the language of community (see Richter, Göbel and Grubbauer, this issue). A concern for community may be seen as good design thinking but it can be poor sociology. As a sound-good proxy for the social, the notion of community is always morally loaded and often sociologically trite. Quite which actors are taken to constitute the relevant community for any spatial intervention is itself a political design problem. The term provides cover for very different actors who may be affected by or have an interest in design and development processes, at various scales and with disparate degrees of power, while obscuring all manner of social dynamics and exclusions. Couched in the soothing idiom of community or the bloodless jargon of the stakeholder, the stock characters of consultation procedures tend to simplify a complicated social field of interest and apathy, investment and opposition, co-optation and conflict. The ways in which community organisation, mobilisation and planning agendas reflect more privileged local class interests and networks is well-known (among recent accounts, see Colomb 2017; Parker 2017). But critical approaches to socialising design can also reproduce the language and implied moral claims

of community without specifying the actors, interests and antagonisms that this folds in or excludes.

Using the language of community is frequently about taking a partisan position: for low-income residents rather than 'gentrifiers'; tenants rather than landlords; market-traders rather than chain retailers; bus-riders rather than car-owners. These may be good positions to take, but phrasing critical loyalties to particular actors in terms of a generalised 'community' makes them neither empirically precise nor especially virtuous. A pro-development business-owner or middle-class mortgagee might be no less part of the local community for any design intervention than an embattled social tenant; even if a designer, activist, public official or social critic prefers to advocate for the interests of the latter. Socialising design with an eye to the social identities, interests and investments at stake in any design context means avoiding easy precepts about who is to be considered part of a community of concern. As a tactical language, community offers a means of making common cause, claiming voice and taking a recognised position in a field of design contestation, but it does not stand for the 'social' in any straightforward way. A politics of the social involves various, competing and overlapping interests and claims: residents of different tenures, longevities and incomes; workers, traders and employers; consumers, commuters and campaigners; property-owners, profiteers and protesters. Rather than falling back on solidaristic assumptions about community – let alone ticking the empty boxes of community consultation – socialising design in this domain has to do with recognising different interests that are often conflictual and which may not be reconcilable.

2. Social relations of design: from process to production

This last point opens onto a larger field for thinking about the actors involved in or affected by design processes. It goes beyond the social range of end-users, or the collateral social damage of those 'impacted' by spatial design, to a longer roll-call of those engaged in its production. The latter is, of course, a sphere in which architects and urban designers, planners, surveyors and engineers purposively organise material space and fashion built forms. But the design of buildings, spaces, streets and cities takes place within a much broader design context involving legal divisions, economic distributions, political

deliberations, social institutions and planning processes. It is these designs that create the conditions under which anything gets built, used, maintained or demolished. Too tight a focus on the nominal 'designer' gives a great deal of weight to actors who may have relatively little power over how physical spaces ultimately are produced, while underplaying other kinds of agency – institutional, official and more 'informal'; technical, material and all too human – which are deeply implicated in the making of buildings, spaces and cities; from financialised property schemes, pension funds and asset managers, to legal and planning regulations, politicians, princes and presidential hangers-on (see, *inter alia*, Imrie and Street 2009; Jones 2009; McNeil 2009; Sklair 2017).

There is now an important critical literature on the ways in which the work of conceiving, making and maintaining space is distributed across different kinds of actors – in what Jacobs and Merriman (2011, 217; 216) describe as a 'many-handed effort' engaged not just in drawing, but in 'drawing together' various forms of expertise and agency, materials and objects, bits and pieces. Indeed, critical urban studies has developed quite sophisticated analyses of the role of non-human actors in the production and reproduction of built environments, inspired in part by a Latourian imagination in which all designs 'are "collaborative" designs – even if in some cases the "collaborators" are not visible, welcomed, or willing' (Latour 2008, 6; see also Latour and Yaneva 2008; Yaneva 2009). The critical project to de-centre the designer is a valuable one, but one of the nagging concerns raised by such perspectives is a tendency to analogise the agency of human and non-human actors, such that the social forms of design production – and specifically the labour it entails – can become obscured.

Alongside the analysis of design in terms of a complex of associations between people and things, drawings and calculations, rules and regulations, it is worth emphasising an older and probably cruder sense of the social relations of design: that of work. Peggy Deamer (2015, 62; 61) has spoken of the 'work-aphasia' that afflicts much contemporary thinking about architectural design, based on a prevalent and 'pathetic notion of design that isolates it from work.' Deamer uses this premise to criticise the lack of labour organisation and mobilisation around architectural work, but it cuts in other ways in concealing the place of design in an extended division of labour engaged in the production of space. For Deamer, a

collective mental block around the notion of design as work makes sense within a set of broader socio-economic shifts which privilege processes of consumption (and the value generated thereby) over those of production:

Architecture's eradication of a discourse of design labour's relationship to construction labour and with it any discourse of architecture as a type of labour itself is not accidental. It works in capitalism's interest that labour is eradicated from our consciousness: no more organized complaining about how profit is (not) distributed fairly amongst owners, managers, and actual producers! (Deamer 2016, 137)

The displacement of labour from the field of design obscures various forms of work engaged in processes of spatial production, and not only that of the architect. Andrew Ross (2010, 10), for instance, contends that the analysis of such a labour economy needs to figure in the work of self-builders and DIY enthusiasts, trades-people and jobbing labourers alongside that of designers, engineers, surveyors or construction workers. Moreover, it 'should also include the work of public participants in charettes, impact hearings, crowdsourcing, and, above all, the focus groups conducted by the industry's market researchers.' In the discussion above I have suggested that these forms of participation commonly are understood in terms of the 'end'-users of design, or of those others who may be affected by spatial developments – that is, in terms of social actors at the consumption end of design processes. But Ross asks us to think about this more in terms of social relations of design *production*. Public engagement, community consultation, environmental and social impact assessments have generated a growth industry of facilitators and flip-charters (see Julier, this issue; Minton 2013) – and represent a cost to developers and public agencies – but rely on the unpaid time of those being engaged, consulted or notionally impacted upon. It is of course true that participation in democratic and deliberative processes generally works through an equation in which some of the deliberators get paid for it while most of the demos don't, and there are clear risks in suggesting that either private or public developers should pay individuals to come and be consulted (even if sometimes they do). But Ross is making a larger point about the extent to which 'the massive, ongoing effort to transfer work from the realm of production to that of the consumer is an increasingly vital hidden labor component of consumer capitalism' (Ross 2010, 10). In design contexts in which well-capitalised developers or entrepreneurial city governments are adept at the new

orthodoxies of consultative design, the engagement of users enrolls a form of unremunerated effort that is now integral to the business model of design-as-usual.

This argument resonates with the ways in which mainstream approaches to the social aspects of design focus on the point of consumption – with users or residents or local ‘communities’ standing in for the social content of any design process. One of the things to note about this identification of the social with the consumption end of design is how localising such a discourse is – it necessarily centres on those who are more or less directly affected by a design intervention, most likely to engage with it, or most readily captured within the frame of the architect’s visualisation (see Richter, Göbel and Grubbauer, this issue; see also Purcell 2006). Enlarging the focus to take in the social relations of design production, however, expands this frame in important ways; both in moving beyond the local site context and in populating it with some different actors. Andrew Ross again gets at this well, noting how the

rise of subcontracting on a global scale has meant that routine design operations – drafting, rendering, modeling – are increasingly assigned to cheaper labor in offshore locations. There are few architectural firms in which high-skill jobs are not threatened by this rise up the value ladder of outsourcing. In the meantime the bulk of actual labor going into the built environment is increasingly performed by undocumented migrants, whose own housing needs and life aspirations are as invisible to the architectural profession as they are to the general public. (Ross 2010 10)

Ross is concerned with the US case in particular, but the geographies of migrant construction labour stretch much wider: in the informal employment of internal migrants in developing urban contexts, and particularly in China and South Asia; the indentured labour of foreign building workers in the cities of the Gulf; or the role of unorganised migrant workers in European cities (see Berntsen 2016; Datta 2008; Malecki and Ewers 2007; Swider 2014, 2015; Wells 2007; Zeitlyn et al. 2014).

This approach to the social relations of design brings into play actors and issues largely excluded from the conventional view. Design processes are only selectively taken to include the social processes through which schemes are physically produced (cf. Amhoff, Beech and

Lloyd Thomas 2016). Architectural and urban designers may take a serious interest in the materials and building technologies employed in construction, but tend to have more limited interest in the labour processes and employment relations entailed in realising their spatial designs as physical forms. If architects can no longer avoid – indeed actively embrace – the question of how buildings are produced in environmental terms, and are expected to have due regard for the economic costs of construction, it is not clear why the social relations and costs of production should fall outside the design purview. There is a marked gap between the concern within certain approaches to socially-engaged architecture with the value of self-build and architectural co-production – the social and design good represented by involving users in the construction, fitting and adaptation of their housing or schools or community centres – and the more general disregard within mainstream design discourse for those who build, fit and convert any of these structures not as prospective users but as waged (or indentured) labourers.

Construction is among the deadliest employment sectors globally, and a key sector for forced labour and casualisation; yet the agency of workers is not typically understood as one of the ‘social’ elements – or social commitments – implicated in the making of buildings and spaces. Before building projects are apartments or shopping malls or office buildings or stadia (or, for that matter, cultural centres or public squares or health clinics or libraries), they are workplaces and, as such, contexts for interactions which are every bit as social as those implied in later uses of these sites. Given the emphasis in contemporary design discourses and practices on how people interact with buildings, it is striking how little focus there is on the social production of built forms in terms of employment relations, labour processes and workplace conditions. Such questions, when they are raised at all, typically are side-lined as a question for the client, the contractor or the governing regime, rather than a concern which sits anywhere within the field of design. The ways in which the social relations of design production run from drawing-board to building-site, however, raise issues which any seriously ‘social’ concern with design practice should be willing to engage (Tonkiss 2014). Issues of labour processes and workers’ conditions arise most acutely in settings which also lack regulatory frameworks for consultation or social impact assessment, of course, but they are hardly absent from more privileged development contexts which otherwise affect concern for the social dimensions of design processes – especially given the

degree to which contemporary forms of spatial development depend on transnational industry networks, migrant geographies of construction labour and the outsourcing of routine design work. Opening up the social field of design to a broader politics of production and work, in a different way, makes room for the idea that those involved in the production of the built environment might have a legitimate interest in the forms that this takes (as, for example, in Kurt Iveson's (2014) work on the Green Ban movement in 1970s Sydney led by the Builders Labourers' Federation); or for an argument that the re-making of urban environments is a valid focus of labour politics, as seen in recent trade union platforms for housing rights (Unite n.d.; see also Watt and Minton 2016), and campaigns against estate renewal in the 'alpha territories' of London which have sought to protect social housing provision for low-paid workers¹.

3. Design socialism

This is to suggest that critical and practical efforts to socialise design need to go beyond the consumption stage of design processes to take in the social relations of design production – which involves both unsettling the 'user' as the social end-point of design and seeing them as enrolled in various ways in the work of spatial development. It is also to point to another, substantive sense in which design comes to be *socialised* – in terms of the ownership, distribution and management of both resources and processes. The autoconstructions of the urban poor (see Simone 2015) which inform much contemporary work on social architecture show that it is necessary to think further than state actors and public provision in thinking about socialised design. In contexts in which public funding or investment is scarce, official expertise limited or absent, state regulation, capacity and oversight lacking, it is non-state actors who represent key agents for a socialised urbanism. This may take the form of social investment and social collateral for land acquisition and development financing, sweat-equity building, communal provision of infrastructure and other services, and collective forms of stewardship and regulation. What may be seen as a typically low-income model of collective effort – the everyday socialism that is the basis of much ordinary urbanism in the absence or abandonment of the state – speaks more broadly to forms of socialised provision that disrupt blunt distinctions between state and market, public and private investment, rich and poor-world urban contexts, and between those who design and

those who use space. Forms of open-source and DIY urbanism, for instance, break down the distinction between designer and user in treating knowledge as a common resource and through the practice of design as direct action (see, *inter alia*, Corsín Jiménez 2014; Deslandes 2013; Douglas 2014; Finn 2014; Iveson 2013; Talen 2015). These kinds of free-issue and tactical urbanism run together questions of how spatial design is produced, distributed and ‘consumed’ in seeking to decommodify design expertise and democratise its practice. They may be marginal to the practice of design-as-usual, but they highlight in a concentrated way an argument that processes of spatial design entail social relations of production and distribution which both precede and shape the consumption of design outcomes.

A focus on the production and distribution of design, then, might help us to conceive the project of ‘socialising’ design in a fuller sense – in terms of the socialised forms in which spatial interventions come to be funded, created, managed, used and maintained. This includes, of course, elements of public funding and regulation as well as for-profit private investments, but also takes in diverse forms of social ownership and equity, co-financing and collaborative design, communal stewardship and common use. Community land trusts and collective tenures; limited equity cooperatives and co-housing developments; social enterprises, community interest companies or benefit corporations; local real estate and energy co-operatives; peer-to-peer lending and venture funding; time banking, local currencies and crowd-funding; open-source design strategies and creative commons licensing: these are solidary strategies for ownership and investment, for the management, planning and design of space, which are not simply reliant on public provision or subject to the prerogatives of private interest. Such actually-existing socialisms involve various designs for organisational forms, ownership structures and modes of stewardship as contexts and conditions for the design of physical space. In contemporary settings in which private and speculative interests dominate, in which public ownership and investment is reduced or simply absent, and in which exclusionary practices of regulation and access abound, meaningfully ‘socialised’ spaces may seem a distant or minor prospect. Yet amidst and against these trends persist diverse patterns of collective ownership and investment, cooperative management and common use which provide the basis for approaches to socialised design, building and stewardship, and alternative systems of equity, resourcing

and regulation. All of these elements can be understood as part of the production and distribution of designs on space: some of them are more organised, authorised and expert than others, but all play a part in the ways in which spaces are conceived, made, activated, secured and maintained.

This discussion began with uses and users as central to social concerns within practices of spatial design. Such a focus remains important, but too easily what is social in the field of design may be reduced to context – the things happening in the background against which designers goes to work – or conceived as object, that malleable stuff which might be engineered through design interventions. In either case, as backdrop or as endpoint, the social is figured as largely external rather than integral to design itself; as residing downstream in processes of design. A critical engagement with the social dimensions of design is not limited, however, to seeing the social as what goes on around the design process, much less as the non-expert audience for design interventions. Socialising design has to do not only with the ends and impacts of spatial projects, but the complex of social relations involved in the production of design, and the logics of social distribution which determine who gets how much of it.

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¹ <http://www.gmb.org.uk/newsroom/kick-out-chelsea-estate-planning-application>. Other strategies seek to defend the tenure security and housing quality of social tenants not by opposing estate renewal altogether but through proposing design alternatives, or what

Architects for Social Housing have termed 'resistance by design' – see
<https://architectsforsocialhousing.wordpress.com/category/resistance-by-design/>