

Chapter 12

Design Freedom: Constructing the Social Pillar of Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of increasing recognition of the social and cultural pillar of sustainable development, this chapter advances the notion of design freedom as a conceptual and methodological tool for deepening our commitments towards participatory and emancipatory design. Drawing from Sen's development as freedom approach, design freedom is broadly defined as a process that identifies opportunities for people to ameliorate their life conditions. In addition to enabling sustainability, design freedom is also a transformative process in and of itself, expanding opportunities of all participants in the process. As such, it augments the subfield of design methods adding processual consideration to its instrumental orientation. The chapter offers an illustration of the potential of design freedom as research and action approach by presenting a case study of co-design with the Pinoleville Pomo Nation tribe in California. This design freedom project identified and fostered three key capacities for community flourishing: distributed agency, expressive materials, and effective form.

INTRODUCTION

Design can be understood as a process of transformation that enables the betterment of people's life conditions, as such, it is usually associated with development. Design is typically exercised by the creation of a product whether it is a tool, a machine, an app, a building, or, as Burnett and Evens suggest, life itself (Burnett and Evans, 2016). As design developed as a profession, it moved to the hands of people with credentials and divorced from the aspiration of the lay users. While in the process of professionalization, design gained the rigor of more systematic methods, it lost contact and touch with the very people it aspires to serve.

Social design developed in reaction to that top down professional approach advocating for the involvement of people in the design process. Social design brought about more attention to the process

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itself and established some methodologies for bringing lay users to the design table but ultimately it preserved the product orientation: the assimilation of users in the design process was needed to warrant a more successful, sustainable outcome, a socially appropriate product. The product is still the measure for the success of the design process.

While building on this line of research and endorsing the need to engage people in the design process, the author argues for pushing these ideas further and considers the process itself as transformative. While it is artificial to separate the process and the product, as the motivation for the process is the product, and the process is instrumental to the product, the author suggests that for the social transformation, the process has greater impact than the product. This chapter analyzes a social design case-study and explores how the process of design accomplishes transformation even before the product is complete.

A prominent design example for the glorified importance of the design product, is the “Bilbao effect,” a term highlighting the power of one building to change the prospect and prosperity of a whole city and its inhabitants. The Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry, had, undoubtedly, an impact on the city of Bilbao. Yet further analysis reveals that though the museum attracts an unprecedented number of tourists per year, it is not necessarily the museum that propelled the amplitude of positive outcomes. According to Hawthorne, a preparatory planning process laid the foundation for the museum’s success, which included political negotiations, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and major development of the supporting infrastructure (Hawthorne, 2017). Urban transformation at this scale, which included environmental cleaning of the local river, changes in the transportation system, were implemented through public programs and departments with a process induced by democratic characteristic of the public system.

BACKGROUND: SOCIAL DESIGN—FROM ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Sustainability as an objective, is a term that evolved greatly and while it is considered here as a design goal, its epistemology brings knowledge both from design and from non-design disciplines. While the origins of sustainability as an environmental movement can be traced back to the industrial revolution, the prominence of social concerns in sustainability became widely recognized relatively recently. In the 1960s, around the same time that the environmental movement in design was mostly concerned about energy and materials, a separate sub-discipline, Environmental Psychology, studied the interaction be-

Figure 1. Sustainable development as an amalgam of sub-disciplines



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