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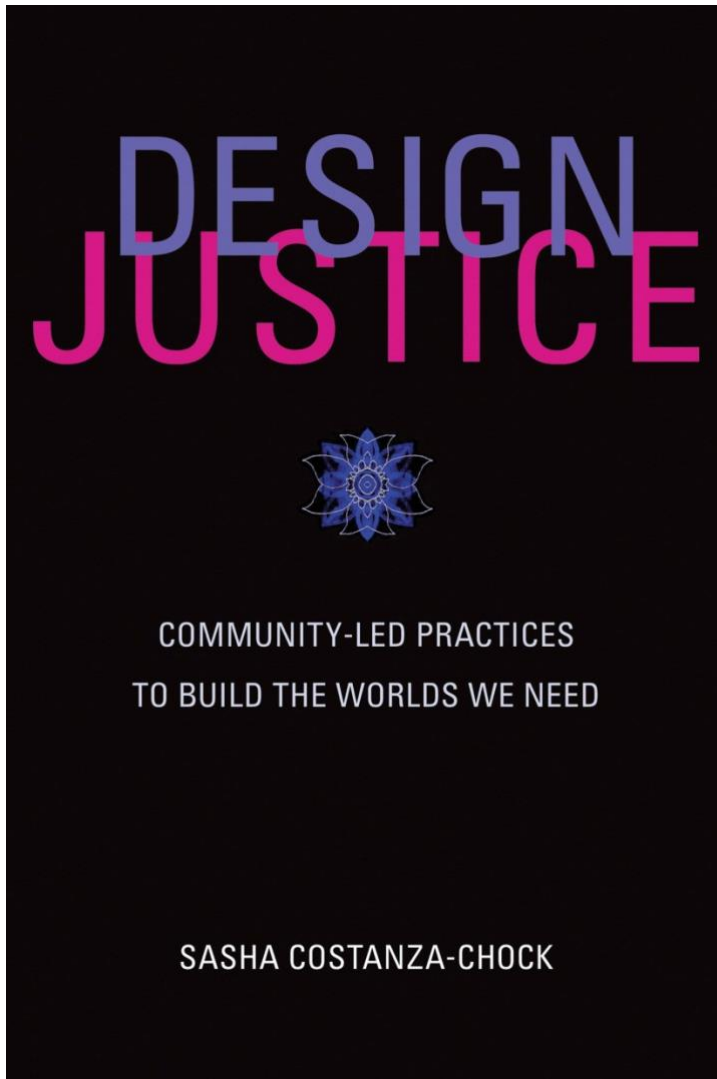
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Book review: Design justice - Community-led practices to build the worlds we need

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'Design Justice - Community-led practices to build the worlds we need' is an essential read for those involved with social design and social justice. Defining design justice as "an exploration of how design might be led by marginalized communities, dismantle structural inequality, and advance collective liberation and ecological survival", Constanza-Chock position it as a function of power in design processes, hypothesising that design justice is a result of who has power while researching and while designing, the decisions they make and how these decisions affect marginalised groups.

Background

The author, Sasha Costanza-Chock, is a communications scholar, participatory designer and activist, using the pronouns she/her and they/theirs. Currently working as Associate Professor of Civic Media at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA, they have published many other defining works on the links between information and communication technologies and social movements, such as 'Out of the Shadows and Into the Streets! Transmedia Organizing and the Immigrant Rights Movement'. Their approach is to take the established paradigms of the design process and reassess the fundamental tenets with the lens of social justice. They use the storytelling approach of critical feminism to give examples of lived experiences that illustrate the norms, values and assumptions encoded in the socio-technical systems in our society. They write against the production and reproduction of systemic oppression, with the confessed idealistic aims of building a better, more inclusive world.

Constanza-Chock laud Langdon Winner's thesis 'Do artifacts have politics?' (1980) as a driving force for their work. They criticise the standardisation of products and services to the exclusion of the minority, which was first highlighted by Simone Browne in her book 'Dark Matters' (2015). They first gave the 'resisting reduction' manifesto in their essay in the Journal of Design & Science (2018), writing from their standpoint of knowledge from embodied experiences as a non-binary trans-feminine person. Their competency is based on lived experience and empirically grounded in participatory action research and co-design, specifically from their association with Research Action Design Lab, Tech for Social Justice and the Civic Media: Collaborative Design Studio course at MIT. The book presents a manifesto based on principles put first put forward by the Design Justice Network (2015) to transform design for good to design for liberation. The manifesto posits that people who are most harmed by generic design decisions usually have the least influence on those decisions, and proposes a rethink and reframe of design processes. In particular, the author questions the values, practices, narratives, sites and pedagogies embodied in design processes.

Book structure

Constanza-Chock begin by tracing the roots of design justice in value-sensitive design, universal design and inclusive design. These shifts in design theory have brought in threads of feminism and anti-racism from science and technology studies (STS), in particular the 'matrix of domination' (Collins, 2002). The author theorises that design justice stems from a core concept of design, 'affordances', originating in the 1970s in cognitive psychology. Chapter one relates stories of design affordances, products being used in ways that were not originally designed or intended, such as the use of Facebook as a site of mobilisation for social protests. The author constructs the implicit injustice perpetuated by disaffordances and dysaffordances (Wittkower, 2018): one constrains function while the other makes users misidentify their own identity to access functions. 'Dysaffordance' is driven by gender dysphoria where standardisation becomes discriminatory design. The average excludes those who don't meet the definition of 'average'.

The next chapter moves the argument from equity to accountability and community control, in the context of participatory processes, user-led innovation and feminist human-computer interaction. Constanza-Chock note that although all humans design, only some earn a living out of it: generally privileged professionals, high in the matrix of domination. These professional networks concentrate agency and power within groups of others like themselves, perpetuating discriminatory social structures in technologies. Chapter three gives examples of the design of design technologies with a case study of Twitter, where the counter-narratives of its origins have been forgotten. Constanza-Chock decry the popular and prominent narratives of innovation and design as 'well-resourced corporate mythologies' (p. 116) that concentrate and celebrate the individual genius inventors, discounting and ignoring other contributions like social movements.

Another example is the Microsoft 'Reinvent the Toilet Challenge', where designers and inventors around the world raced to innovate the ideal toilet. The definition of the project's aims and scope weas controlled by the novelty narrative, and the values of social good embedded into the designed objects were sadly ignored.

Chapter four covers the changing landscapes of design processes with the newly emerging subaltern sites like hacklabs, maker spaces, fab labs and hackathons, community gathering spaces that often reproduce social inequalities at the expense of marginalised communities. The author demands a reorganisation that challenges the tacit matrix of domination. The following chapter reflects on critical pedagogies and builds upon the theories of critical pedagogy, popular education and praxis, practical knowledge for action, constructionist design theories, community technology pedagogy and feminist pedagogies of data science. It lays a framework for democratising design education, not as a neutral process that maintains the status quo or challenges it, but about issues that people care about, teaching people to identify the correct problems, identifying root causes to generate correct solutions.

Critique

The book outlines a manifesto for enabling all citizens to be equal decision-makers in the design process. This thought has been around in the design discipline for some time, but this book creates a formal manifesto for both design education and design practice. The book builds on the feminist STS approach that the world around us is socio-technical, and the infrastructure of constraints and affordances that determines how we design and use designed products is led by the codes that have been socially ingrained in us. The book is an examination of current design values, practices, narratives, sites and pedagogies to incorporate the tenets of design and social justice at the individual, community and institutional levels. Figure 1 condenses the progress of the design process in participatory ventures across the spectrum from strong control to more consultative control. The aim is to help design for people who have been excluded due to omission.
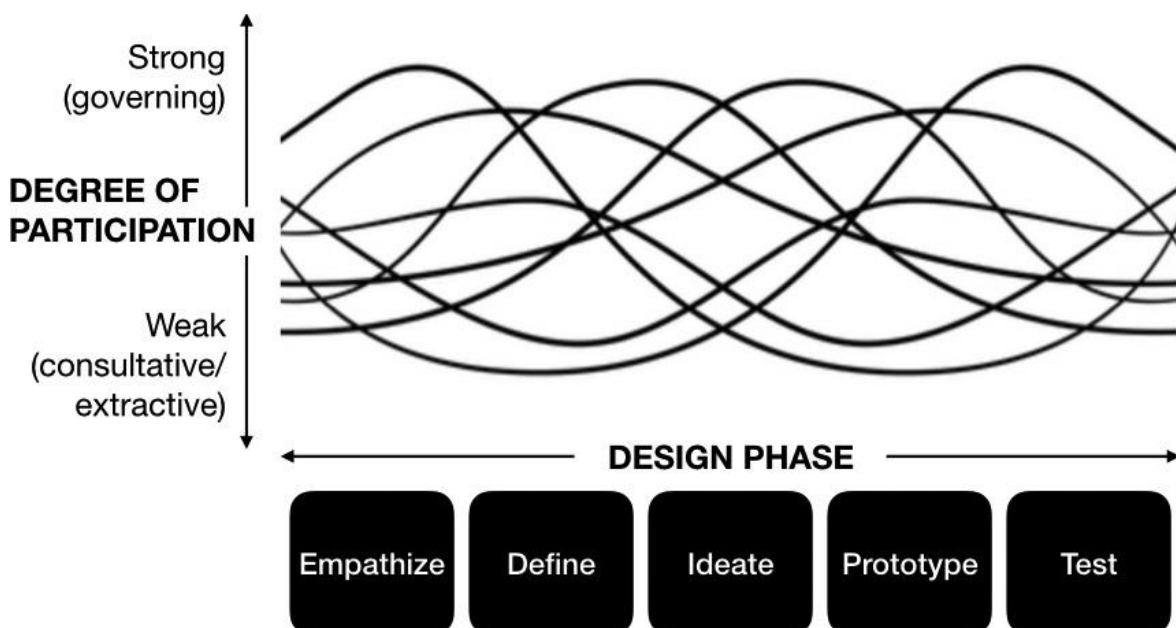

Figure 1: Analysis of community participation throughout the design process (Constanza-Chock, 2020, p. 91).

One of the book's main strengths is that it abounds in examples of where design has inadvertently disenfranchised marginalised groups due to disaffordances and dysaffordances. This myopia in design affects not just tangible objects, images and the built environment, but also intangible socio-technical systems. The author leads with the example of the inadvertent prejudice of millimetre wave scanners at security check zones of airports against non-binary citizens, which resonates with the theatre of security one experiences in airports. Costanza-Chock echo Foucault's approach to knowledge as a form of the perpetuation of social violence if a conscious balance of power is not actualised in participatory design and acts of co-creation that jeopardise design justice. The onus is on the designer to reflect and realise equilibrium in design methods and design politics.

Costanza-Chock criticise design for its 'Band-Aid' approach that ignores rather than examines root cause problem-solving. Commercial design processes have been berated as 'design by committee', ineffective, inelegant and neglecting core concerns. Design justice demands an intentional decision to frame the benefits as well as the harms of designed products and systems in a contextual manner. In recent literature, Escobar's 'Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds' (2018) and Holmes' 'Mismatch: How Inclusion Shapes Design' (2020) also expound on similar concerns of social injustice through omission.

Although the good intentions of design justice are undeniable, questions about its practicality have been raised by critics. Design justice activists exhort the higher moral goals of creating the world we want to live in, but challenges of limited resources and time in the real world lead to trade-offs. There is a legitimate fear that no just outcomes may ever come out of the process, a fear that processes of design justice may slow real-world design processes down beyond viability, but design justice activists say that is a small cost to pay for a more just world, where design is a tool for liberation.

Summation

Though written before the global Covid-19 pandemic, this book comes at an opportune time. The pandemic has exacerbated social disparities the world over, and the time is now ripe for community-led change that can help marginalised communities. Exigent times like these can be catalysts for creating the right environment for transformational change that can be sustained. Power structures are often bypassed, and change can be initiated from individuals across the socio-political spectrum. Designers, developers and technologists hold immense sway in the current political economy, and, unknowingly, the infrastructure they build perpetuates larger systemic inequalities. Positive action on their part can initiate change that has far-reaching consequences. The manifesto of design justice defined in this book can help designers reach that distant future in a fairer, more equitable way.

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