Total design of participation:
Ideas of collective creativity by Tim Brown,
László Moholy-Nagy and Walter Gropius

Anders V Munch / University of Southern Denmark / Kolding / Denmark

Abstract

The idea of design as an art made not only for the people, but also by the people is an old dream going back at least to William Morris. It is, however, reappearing vigorously in many kinds of design activism and grows out of the visions of a Total Design of society. The ideas of participation by Tim Brown can be compared to considerations by László Moholy-Nagy and Walter Gropuis on the training and education of active and capable citizens. This opens, though, some dilemmas to discuss: To what extend is the capability of creativity then a (pre)condition to be a citizen of the society wished for? To which degree should everyone be educated in 'design literacy' to participate? Total design of participation is an artistic intervention in society and must be discussed in this utopian tradition.

Keywords

Participation, Total Design, Design Thinking, Bauhaus, Gesamtkunstwerk

Introduction

Participation of users, citizens and different experts in design processes is a strong focus in current design theories, but ideas of participation have had a long history in art and design. They have mostly related to big scale challenges in total design, i.e. more or less utopian projects to address social or cultural critiques, where design should raise collective creativity and new forms of communities. And this is still the case, if we look at the manifest of Design Thinking, *Design for Change*, by Tim Brown of IDEO. "If we are to deal with what Bruce Mau has called the "massive change" that seems to be characteristic of our time, we all need to think like designers." (Brown 2009, 37) To solve the grand challenges everyone has to participate and perhaps even act and think like designers. Admittedly, it is not quite clear, who are "we" in this quote, or to which extend laypersons are to participate as designers, but I will address such questions in a broader historical scope. This is not a critique of utopianism by Brown or Mau, but comparisons with earlier understandings and discussions of participation by "design thinkers" to point out some critical topics.

Despite the alert call, Brown does not regard Design Thinking as a new phenomenon. He refers to both engineers, architects and artist from the 19th century and throughout design history as role models (ex Brown 2009, 228). Beyond Bruce Mau, Papanek and Buckminister-Fuller he mentions William Morris, where he finds the basic critique of the loss of meaning in the accelerating, wasteful consumption (Brown 2009, 114). It can't be more classical, but as Brown mentions, his book is not written to designers (who are raised in the very long tradition of thinking this way). His ambition is to open this mental toolbox to boardroom executives and social entrepreneurs. The rich experience and the tool kits of IDEO as a hugely successful design consultant organization are, of course, a valuable contribution in this discussion of how to deal with grand challenges. Brown evokes, however, great spirits of the design tradition without reflecting on, how they understood and dealt with dilemmas as for example participation.

I will visit earlier discussion of participation in the writings of the Bauhäusler László Moholy-Nagy and Walter Gropius, who raised them in connection with large-scale goals of Design-for-Life and Total Architecture, and address some of the dilemmas that might still be challenging. If participation means creative understanding or even to act and think like a designer, to what extend is the capability of artistic creativity then a (pre)condition to be a citizen of the society wished for? To which degree should everyone be educated in "design literacy" to participate?

Total Design

Participation is discussed widely today, and many contribution are much more pragmatic and oriented towards more limited goals and might avoid such dilemmas. But the earlier ideas, I focus on, were connected to grand challenges that called for holistic approaches beyond specific individuals or professions and solutions beyond singular design object in reorganizing production, communication and society. Design was thought to tap into all these fields, engage with all arts and sciences and work in all means and medias, so that the solutions aspired to be total designs. The same, grand scale is evoked by Mau and Brown; societal and ecological challenges are calling for interdisciplinary participation. "We are designing nature and we are subject to her laws and powers. This new condition demands that design discourse not be limited to boardrooms or kept inside tidy disciplines." (Mau 2004, 16)

If we go to László Moholy-Nagy and the book *Vision in Motion*, 1947, his design definition left little to be added by later design thinking. "There is design in organization of emotional experiences, in family life, in labor relations, in city planning, in working together as civilized human beings. Ultimately all problems of design merge into one great problem: 'design for life'." (Moholy-Nagy 1969, 42) His students were taught in material and visual experiment in the Bauhaus-tradition, but he wanted their way of working to spread to all working citizens. "This implies that it is desirable that everyone should solve his special task with the wide scope of a true "designer", with the new urge to integrated relationships." (Moholy-Nagy 1969, 42) Any task had to be solved through a holistic understanding of modern society, a complex thinking in relationships across scales and fields.

In direct continuation of this quote he mentions the range of artistic means as set off for design solution. "It further implies that there is no hierarchy of the arts, painting, photography, music, poetry, sculpture, architecture, nor of any other field such as industrial design. They are equally valid departures toward the fusion of function and context in "design"." (Moholy-Nagy 1969, 42) It might be puzzling that he seems to plunge back into artistic forms with this reference, but it was experiments across all artistic medias – visual, material, sonic, bodily, and spatial forms – that were the base of the development of total design at the Bauhaus School (Forgács 1997, Munch 2012a). And this kind of total design should help people to see and engage with modern reality, i.e. science, technology, economics, and mass media (Margolin 1997, Munch 2012b). The composition of artistic medias unfolded as a communication of a new experience and understanding of the complexities of modern society; in the end a new way of "thinking in relationships", as it is called in the writings of both Moholy-Nagy and Gropius (Moholy-Nagy 1969, 12; Probst & Schädlich 1988, 183). This phrase in it self is clearly an earlier version of Design Thinking.

Who are "we"

The positions I have mentioned and quoted oscillate between referring to the whole people or a more professionally trained team as creative collaborators. And this is also the case reading Brown and Mau. The later makes precise, though, that his "we" doesn't mean any exclusive professions or special interests. "When we use the term "we", we don't mean designers as separate from clients, or as some extraordinary class of powerful overseers. We mean "we" as citizens collectively imagining our futures." (Mau 2004,18)

Tim Brown goes so far to suggest a "new social contract" and sees a dissolving of the opposition of interests between consumers and companies in an emerging collaboration. "Companies are ceding control and coming to see their customers not as "end users" but rather as participants in a two-way process. What is emerging is nothing less than a new social contract." (Brown 2009, 200) It is IT and social medias, which challenge the control of commercial interests, and also makes the contributions of users and customers useful to firms. The terms of this social contract, though, is not discussed much here. Brown continues by stating a demand just to the public part.

> "Every contract, however, has two parties. If people do not wish companies to treat them like passive consumers, they must step up to the controls and assume their fair share of responsibility. The implications are clear: the public, too, must commit to the principles of design thinking […]." (Brown 2009, 201)

Though, it is fair to state a responsibility on both parts of this "contract", it is critical just to redefine the one part from "passive consumers" to a participating public capable of design thinking. If it is hard to define the "we" out of common interest, we run the risk of restricting the common participants to people with a socio-cultural surplus to engage or even capability to perform in creative processes.

Creativity as literacy?

The reason why Gropius and Moholy-Nagy insisted on the core position of artistic creativity in the organisation and building of society was that they saw a threat in the accelerating specialisation of experts and professions with a diminishing overview and understanding of society as a whole, culture as relations, and the importance of common interests. (Gropius 1955, 171) Art was in their understanding part of a common education, where artists had to have an interest in all parts of science and society, and art had to be part of every citizen's cultural education. And just as important, artistic experiments showed the ability to connect, investigate, challenge and transform the relations all the specialized field of science and society.

> "Not given the tools of integration, the individual is not able to relate all this casual and scattered information into a meaningful synthesis. He sees everything in clichés. His sensibility dulled, he loses the organic desire for self-expression even on a modest level. His natural longing for direct contact with the vital, creative forces of existence becomes transformed into the status of being well informed and well entertained." (Moholy-Nagy 1969, 19)

This was the dystopia of the passive individual in a disintegrated society. But any kind of creative engagement was thought to better the situation, empower the individuals to see and think in complex relation and transform them into active, participating citizens. "In fact one could say that all creative work today is part of a gigantic, indirect training program to remodel through vision in motion the modes of perception and feeling and to prepare for new qualities of living." (Moholy-Nagy 1969, 58) In this sense all the creative experiments across arts, medias and sciences Moholy-Nagy did built into the curriculum of his Institute of Design were only a model of all creative work in modern culture, where people experienced to work and think in relationships. This would "prepare for new qualities of living" – which are not further explained – but surely this also had to teach people indirectly to understand and appreciate these Modernist qualities. It was an education of aesthetic literacy.

Walter Gropius returned to these ideals in his late writings in the 1950s, where he wrote on Total Architecture as the "entire visible world around us, from the simple house equipment to the complex city" (Probst & Schädlich, 192). In his text, *Scope of Total Architecture*, Gropius went a step further and asked for training in creativity throughout the educational system to make future citizens able to participate in planning processes.
"It means, in short, that we must start at the kindergarten to make children playfully reshape their immediate environment. For participation is the key word in planning. Participation sharpens individual responsibility, the prime factor in making a community coherent, in developing group vision and pride in the self-created environment." (Gropius 1955, 177)

Creative practice was also in line with the reform pedagogy that initially inspired the Bauhaus curriculum. "Experience in action" (Gropius 1955, 177) should form, not only the designer or artist, but everyone from early childhood on.

This way of thinking is part of important educational and political ideals that has lead the development of modern welfare states, but in Gropius' version it seems close to the more speculative experiments of the Aesthetic State (Chytry 1989). These ideas seems more determined by logic of the work of art than politics or ideology. The suggestion in the quotes above is initiated by the question: "Because what we need is not only the creative artist, but a responsive audience and how are we going to get it?" (Gropius 1955, 177) This "responsive audience" is, again, understood as free, but engaged individuals, capable to discuss the creative solutions. The logic here seems, however, to belong to the total work of art, where you have to calculate and compose every aspect, even the audience, as part of a total experience (Koss 2010, Munch 2012a). The ideas of participation, we find in the tradition of Total Design, carry a subtle understanding of the participants as part of the material to be designed. We have to stage participation, design processes and compose roles in future scenarios and plots for design fictions. Participation in Total Design calls for "genuine teamwork" (Gropius 1955, 178), and the results might be open-ended. But what are the requirements to participants as both "materials" and actors, and how far does it change our roles as citizens?

Staging participation?

Contemporary designers avoid references to art; they work in teams and do not strive for masterpieces. But this move is exactly also, what our spokesmen for Total Design, asked for; the move from art to life practice, implemented in modern society of industry, mass media and science (Munch 2012b). There are, of course, other important inspirations for participatory design, but I think, it helps us to discuss the central dilemmas to recall this tradition. Tim Brown

claims the necessity to implement design thinking in education in line with Gropius. "How might we use those methods not just to educate the next generation of designers but to think about how education as such might be reinvented to unlock the vast reservoir of human creative potential?" (Brown 2009, 222) He doesn't reflect, though, what the implications might be, and what is meant by creativity. In which sense is creativity empowerment or perhaps rather requirement to future citizens?

The Kolding Municipality in Denmark has since 2012 run a regeneration program based on participatory design processes, that has crystallized in the headline: *Kolding – We Design for Life* (Julier & Leerberg 2014). The broad notion of design here can be understood in the sense of Moholy-Nagy's Design-for-Life quoted above, but it is less clear, if all citizens have to act and think with "the wide scope of a true designer", or who "we" are? Another slogan here, *From Diapers to Doctorates*, shows a focus on education in creativity and design thinking right from nurseries and kindergartens to the local school of design and university campus, and this seems close to the ambition of Gropius, but it is again less clear, if the goal is the long term education of future, responsive citizens participating in planning, or rather the instant introduction of the lingo of design thinking for communication of political decisions, as alternative to New Public Management? Quite many citizens have attended meetings and events, so there is lot to learn in this grand scale living lab. But it is hard to tell, how far citizens understand of the processes, and what they expect as results. One have to ask, whether this is just a renewed "arms race" to compete with neighbouring city for not only the most, but also the right citizens, the Creative Class, to pay tax, to consume high-end goods and culture, and start up or just support new creative businesses (Julier & Leerberg 2014).

Is very difficult to evaluate such projects, where idealism, politics and economic are so tightly bound, and my wish is only to dig deeper down into this way of thinking and find new ways to discuss both premises and results. First, we have to discuss and explicate what we understand by creativity, and how creative you have to be as a participating, full-rate citizen, part of the new social contract? Moholy-Nagy saw creative expression as human empowerment and the whole range of creative work as the way to new qualities of life. However, you had to be creative to see the purpose and take part in this future society. To substitute the notion of art with a fluffy concept of creativity is not to democratize it. But Brown insist in this way of thinking:

> "We can learn how to take joy in the things we create whether they take the form of a fleeting experience or an heirloom that will last for generations. We can learn that reward comes in creation and re-creation, not just in the consumption of the world around us. Active participation in the process of creation is our right and privilege." (Brown 2009, 241)

The "reward" await us in creativity, but he doesn't consider, how everyone needs aesthetic literacy to understand, take part and enjoy this.

Second, we must be able to distinguish critically between the creative means and the political and cultural goals of participation, because they are so mixed up in our life style and media culture, the Society of the Spectacle (Munch 2012b, 36). We ARE staging participation; we ARE designing processes, composing plots, acting and using a lot of other aesthetic means for this communication. There are artistic logics in the synthetization of the many views and complex relations, and these logics are different than the political logics of democracy. The total design of participation is an artistic tool, which can be very valuable as communication to reach political goals, for both citizens and politicians. But in this sense, design is once more just as much bound to confirm and communicate the existing societal order as to stage alternative scenarios.

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Biographical note

Anders V. Munch, Professor in Design Culture. PhD in art history, Aarhus University 2000, dissertation Der stillose Stil. Adolf Loos, Fink Verlag 2005 (German version). Postdoctoral dissertation Fra Bayreuth til Bauhaus, Aarhus University Press 2012 (in Danish). Author of *Design as Gesamtkunstwerk*. The art of transgression, Copenhagen: Rhodos 2012.