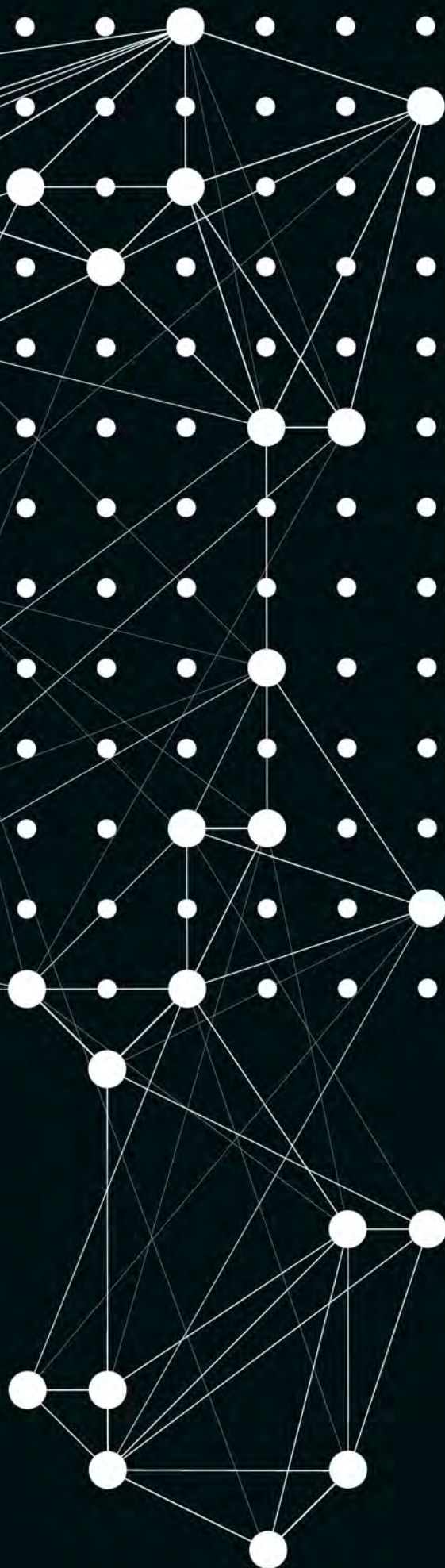


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Front Matter

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Our Common Future?

Political questions for designing social innovation

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Abstract

Design roles are expanding in society, as reflected in a growth of interest and funding for design and design research in the area of 'social innovation'. By social innovation here, I refer to the provision of social services and resources, such as habitation, education, care, mobility and food, in which design is increasingly engaged in the complexity and dynamics of local provision of such services and resources, and in the co-production of alternatives. The question of designing for social innovation necessarily involves political questions about the role of design in how, where, by and for whom, and in what forms, wider social practices and systems, beliefs and authority, may be altered. To explore such questions, I outline methodological approaches, emergent themes and key examples from three case studies, in the US, Denmark and The Netherlands, in which designers, design methods and materials took part in issues and controversies of sustainable development. In these cases, design had roles in (re)producing or rupturing a particular 'commons' in terms of how and where social innovation is framed and staged, for and by 'who' and in 'what' forms.

Keywords

Social innovation, political and critical practices of design, design methods, participatory and co-design, sustainable development

Recent decades have seen a significant shift in how profound and intractable problems such as poverty, disease, violence or environmental deterioration are handled. While such problems have traditionally been handled through national social and spatial policies in Europe, there has been a substantial redistribution to the market, regions and communities. Previous paradigms, premised on centralized, top-down, sectoral and expert-led approaches are increasingly recognized as insufficient (c.f. Gunderson and Holling, 2002; Ostrom, 1990). Sustainability governance in Europe has moved in recent decades toward more 'grounded' and regional forms of social and spatial planning (Raco, 2007), with an emphasis on what Giddens (2005) terms "co-production", in which there "should be collaboration between the state and the citizen in the production of socially desirable outcomes." This shift is embodied in the term 'social innovation', which has been identified as a priority for addressing the "major concerns shared by citizens in Europe and elsewhere" (European Commission, 2011).

Social innovation typically refers to a type of cross-sectoral and transdisciplinary innovation involving multiple societal actors and levels in society. Social innovation manifests in diverse problems with and solutions to the provision of social services and resources, for example, such as habitation, education, care, mobility and food (see the US Office of Social Innovation and Social Innovation Europe for some examples). Social innovation is not an unambiguous term – in Western political history, it is part of a

semantic network of terms associated with social reform, radicalism and socialism (Godin, 2012) and, in contemporary discourse, it is used in a variety of dissimilar ways, for example to refer to social entrepreneurship, social responsibilities of businesses, and the social aspects of technological innovation (Nilsson, 2003). In part, this lack of definition can be explained by the fact that it takes different forms in different historical moments, political regimes, geographic and ecological situations (Westley et al., 2007).

Besides contested definitions of what social innovation is, Mulgan (2007) argued that there is “a remarkable dearth of serious analysis of how social innovation is done and how it can be supported”. This question – ‘how’ – has opened for design approaches premised on traditions of co-production, collaboration and participation (f.ex. Emilson et al, 2011). In this paper, I argue that the question of ‘how’ also involves questions of ‘where’, by and for ‘who’, and in ‘what’ forms, with implications for the political dimensions of design. I explore these questions here through three cases exemplifying design roles in the co-production of alternatives to the handling and provision of local and urban resources.

Design roles in social innovation

Movements toward design for social innovation are part of a more general expansion of design roles in society. Concern in postindustrial formulations of design have moved well “beyond the object”, traditional focus on material form or technical function, or the economic and technical conditions of industrial production and market consumption (Mazé, 2007; Thackara, 1988). A range of design movements, amended as ‘sustainable’, ‘humanitarian’, ‘critical’ or ‘social’, articulate other matters of concern such as those that are socially- and politically-engaged (Ericson and Mazé, 2011). Design approaches to social innovation often involve design roles in the public sphere and service sectors in society, and explicit concern for bottom-up and/or trans-local (rather than top-down) forms of governance or innovation (f.ex. Manzini and Jégou, 2003). For example, many approaches to designing for social innovation are concerned with the community-based or -led approaches to the provision of social services and resources, such as habitation, education, care, mobility and food (f.ex. Manzini and Staszowski, 2013). In these and related approaches, ‘the social’ has become the object of design (c.f. Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren, 2010), with profound effects on how design is understood and practiced.

To address the ‘how’ of social innovation, a variety of approaches have developed in order to situate a common space for multi-disciplinary, -sectoral, and -stakeholder interaction. A variety of relevant projects have been operationalized as intentionally bounded ‘niche’ environments, including those explicitly formulated as so-called ‘living labs’, ‘change labs’, or ‘design labs’ (f.ex. Vezzoli et al., 2008; Bannerjee, 2008; Westley et al, 2012). In such labs the social is often approached through mixes or hybrids of methods from the social science and design including ethnography, citizen participation, stakeholder collaboration, process design and facilitation, rapid prototyping and co-creation (f.ex. Mulgan, 2014; Westley et al, 2012). Thus, the social is not merely the ends to which traditional technical invention or market innovation might be put, nor only the means to which they might be achieved. Social innovation involves processes of (trans)forming connections among existing resources and actors, and it produces profound changes to the basic routines, resource and authority flows of a social system (Westley and Antadze, 2009). It operates through means of, and it produces, profound alterations in social organization. Further, it takes place amidst a myriad of struggles over responsibilities and rights within contemporary pluricentric societies wherein resources and agency are distributed across many actors and at many levels, and in which interests are often in competition at a time of rapid globalization, conflicts over diminishing resources, and rising risk factors (Cucuzzella, 2010).

Designing for social innovation, thus, is not simply a matter of redefinition, of amending innovation business-as-usual with the word 'social', and it involves more than replacing clients in private sector industries with those in the social sector (c.f. Mazé and Llorens, 2013; Julier, 2011). Concerned with the transformation of relations within society, it is a profoundly political matter.

Political questions for design

Considering the expanding design roles in society and design as a political matter requires a consequent expansion of design theory. Relevant concepts that I have explored more extensively elsewhere include critical social theories, including those present in feminist and post-colonial studies, through which issues of ethics, power and agency can be queried in design (Mazé, 2013). In that article, I traced some macropolitical and micropolitical roles of design. Evoking *Our Common Future* (Brundtland, 1987), an enormously influential policy document produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development, I traced some of the language and logics of the macropolitical policy declaration on the micropolitics of everyday design activities, in which both are concerned with how to constitute a "we", a "commons", directed towards a more equitable ecological and social development. I make reference to those terms again here, though I do not take up macropolitics but, rather question the micropolitical dimensions of designing for social innovation. Besides questions of 'how' designing for social innovation may be done, which might too easily be reduced to a technical, procedural or methodological question, I also reflect upon questions of 'where', 'who' and 'what'. Such questions attempt to explore design as profoundly implicated in the micropolitics of (re)producing and reorganizing social relations within everyday life.

I would also position these questions in relation to political philosophies, in which the political is a concept concerned with distinctions among people and groups, the relational formation and contestation of identities, subjectivities, and collectivities that theorists such as Mouffe argue are fundamental to the human condition. 'Politics' refers to the practices and structures through which a particular social order is established, the hegemony of one group over another, a 'we' privileged or subordinate to a 'them' (f.ex. Mouffe, 2010) "What I call 'politics,'" Mouffe (2001) articulates, "...is the ensemble of discourses and practices, institutional or even artistic practices, that contribute to a certain order.... Politics is always about the establishment, the reproduction, or the deconstruction of a hegemony, one that is always in relation to a potentially counter-hegemonic order." Design is always doing politics in this sense – it is always acting in the world to (re)produce socio-spatial order or to rupture a particular order with other or alternative orders (see also Keshavarz and Mazé, 2013). It is always (re)producing or rupturing a particular 'our' or 'commons' in terms of how and where it is framed and staged, spatially and materially, for and by 'who' and in 'what' forms. In this, I am also explicitly interested in social innovation as the reconfiguration of society from within, in which design takes (political) roles in how wider social practices and systems, beliefs and authority, may be profoundly altered.

Our Common Future? Cases and questions

To explore such questions, I will briefly describe and then discuss emergent themes across three cases between 2010 and 2012. 'Amplify', 'DAIM' and 'Living bathing practices' are cases of projects that, while not necessarily defined as social innovation by those involved, deal with common issues of cross-sectoral and transdisciplinary innovation in the provision of social services and resources. At stake were issues such as waste, water, energy, transport and food, the provision of which may more typically be

part of national or regional spatial and social policy. These projects engaged with such issues within specific localities, in which individuals and groups were engaged in resource problems and alternatives to how resources were provided, managed and consumed. Co-production was present in each, involving multiple disciplines, organizations and sectors, and involving as participants local residents as experts, citizens and resource consumers. These are some of the motivations for case selection most relevant to this paper, although there are others such as role of design educations and institutions that were also part of the selection though beyond the scope of this paper. Nor, in this paper, will I dwell on the specifics of problems and solutions. Rather, I will highlight aspects of 'how', 'who' and in 'what' forms design roles were articulated in order to explore design well 'beyond the object', engaged with the political matter of social (re)production and (de)construction.

The case studies were developed through a visit to each project site, each lasting 10-14 days. During these visits, I conducted qualitative interviews with actors in each site, observations of project activities, and analysis of visual and printed materials, design representations and prototypes, aligned with a case study rather than ethnographic research tradition. I selected and approached the cases already sensitized by concepts generated from my previous practice-based research within related projects (c.f. Mazé, 2013). These are small-scale studies that should be seen as exploratory or pilot cases, in which the purpose has been to expand my understanding of the design issues at stake through exploring multiple and different experiences and manifestations of the issues. Below I briefly present the projects, and then I discuss themes emerging from the cases.

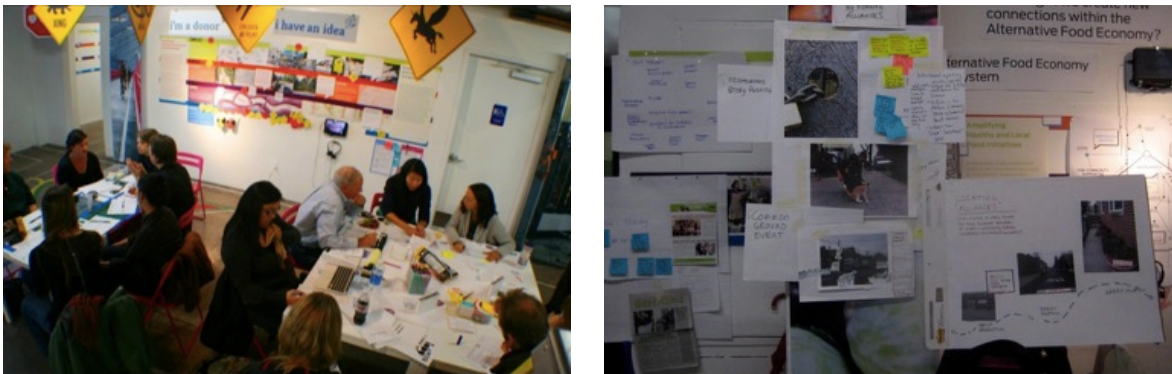


Figure 1: Amplify – ioby workshop (left) Open Design for Organizational Innovation (right)

Amplify

The project aims to 'amplify' community-based solutions for sustainability (Amplify, 2011): "Creative Communities around the world aren't waiting for governments and businesses anymore. They are creating more sustainable ways of living and working for themselves. How can we find, improve, and spread these more sustainable ways of living and working?". It involved local organizations and actors in New York concerned with transportation, water rights, sustainable food, and emergent models of working and living. Amplify is a project of Parsons The New School's Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability (DESI) Lab through a two-year grant from the Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund 2009 with partners such as the Green Map System, ioby (Fig. 1, left), Shareable, Cornell University and IDEO. My study focused on events and an exhibition during two weeks in November, 2011 at a non-profit based in a Brooklyn church.

Commons? 'Where' in designing for social innovation

Social innovation always takes place some 'where', in which different ways of framing and relating to the issues at stake are manifested. The question of where is not only a geographic but a social and historical location – Murray et al. (2008) articulate differences in definitions and approaches to social innovation in European welfare states compared to the US, where social problems and innovations are typically left to individuals, households and philanthropies. Vezzoli et al. (2008) argue for 'niches' of social innovation, designed and operated as protected and shared spaces for multi-disciplinary, -sector and - stakeholder collaboration. Such constructed spaces for collective action might be understood as a kind of commons (Ostrom, 1990). On the micropolitical level of the cases that I studied, 'where' surfaced often and explicitly in relation to discussions of how the projects were set up, how they unfolded, on who's terms and through which methods.

All three projects were explicitly concerned with where activities would take place, reflected in how they were organized and their methodologies. The Amplify project included, for example, a series of activities in which social scientists, designers and locals interacted in different ways. Stakeholder interests were initially identified through a series of qualitative interviews conducted in sites local to participants, designers and locals collaborated in various ways during the course of the two-week installation in Brooklyn, which also included a mixed-methods workshop where social scientists and designers together conducted rapid urban ethnography and design ideation (Fig. 1, right). In these activities, taking place in and across different sites, different methodologies manifested different delineations of roles, expertise and discipline. The DAIM project articulated a 'fieldshop' method (see also Halse et al., 2009), a short event combining ethnographic fieldwork, collaborative analysis and ideation, and experience prototyping, involving an equal number of locals to designers and researchers in the intended locations for interventions. Living Bathing practices evolved through a series of lab-based workshops and tests with users as well as field tests in homes, a 'generative improv performance' was staged with installed prototypes and trained improvisatory actors, and the Concept House will displace families into situations in which they test and are studied within an entirely new environment and ways of living. Each project thus explicitly involved methods from social science and from design, which were mixed and located in different ways.

How the methods were mixed, and how the 'where' enters in as the object of analysis and design, as well as having some kind of conceptual agency in itself, starts to expose how the projects took place in terms of for and by whom. The Amplify interviews, the DAIM fieldshops, and the Living Bathing home tests took place within the contexts of local participants. While the methods in Amplify focused on these to bring in the experiences and expertise of local people, and sites and conditions from the local environment, for analysis and ideation by those in project, The DAIM fieldshops emphasized prototyping and co-design of ideas and possible future experiences with locals in situ, while the Amplify exhibition projected field research into an existing familiar locale that was nonetheless new to many of those involved. While both DAIM and Living Bathing practices were concerned with possible future experiences and ways of living, DAIM fieldshops developed an explicit approach to balance local participants within in situ events. In Living Bathing practices, a concern arose from the home tests about locals' ability to imagine and design beyond the here and now, therefore further methods involved actors as experts in improvising a range of possible futures (Kuijter, 2014), and a move toward experimental settings other than those currently existing. These projects thus represent different approaches to staging encounters of the 'local' – as something or someone(s) to design for, or with; as something/someone(s) that might be made in common, or that might be otherwise for all in another time and somewhere else.

The issue of 'where' also seemed to take on further conceptual meanings. Methodologically, it could be understood as a particular place or locality, existing or imagined, for some or in common. But it also seemed to become a more abstract concept, through which participants oriented and positioned themselves in different ways. In Amplify, designers and researchers spoke about going "native", in which at certain points they brought in or went to "the wild" (see also Penin et al., 2002), emphasizing a delineation between the project team and its sites and those of the locals. In an interview with one of the project team, this delineation also articulated as feeling from the local organization that "You're from academia, you don't live in the neighborhood", but also, within the project team, was sometimes "...playing my role kind of as a local New Yorker". In the spatiality of these expressions, such as "here" versus "there", and "in" and "out", different relations of "I", "we" and "they" also seemed to be implied within self-conscious positioning, process/es of identification and affiliation in ways that were not clear-cut or once and for all but that that also shifted over time. In DAIM, two participants pointed to a "landscape" image in one of the project publications (Halse et al., 2009), which one articulated as a physical and conceptual model of the "design space." Rather than a specific locality it represented a common metaphorical space, "a journey into something where we don't know where its going to end and we can navigate towards the horizon, or relative to the horizon, but as we move, the horizon also moves, and it shifts as we stand on a mountaintop or further down. So the horizon as a metaphor for the imaginative."

Where, in these projects, became both a practical and a conceptual matter. Each explicitly involved places other than those in which the project originated or in which project work primarily took place. This complicates notions such as 'niche', as a separate and shared space, in which it becomes clear that there are very different ways of considering this practically and conceptually. All of the projects attempted to create 'niches', whether more temporary (such as Amplify installations and DAIM fieldshops) or fixed (Concept House for Living Bathing practices), situated within existing conditions (Amplify), enacting possible futures with locals in a lab (Living Bathing improvisations) or in situ (DAIM), or living out alternatives in entirely reconstructed sites (Concept House). Practically, each involved different approaches to inviting in, entering into, imagining alternatives and futures of such places. Methods involving different balances in terms of who participated, when and where, reflect differences not only in where project activities took place, but on who's territories and terms. Besides the practical issue of where, it also seemed to take on conceptual dimensions, in which (re)negotiating roles in the project took place as an ongoing individual positioning in spatial terms or as conceptual device to orient participants within a common journey or landscape. The 'commons', which could perhaps be thought here in terms of a separate or shared space, is constructed differently, on different terms and for different individual and group purposes.

'Co'-Production? 'Who' and 'what'

Further themes emerged around how participation was framed in the projects, and how the agency of different people and material artifacts might be understood. In social innovation discourse, there remain critical questions about whether redistribution of problems and solutions to consumers and communities is accompanied by a devolution of responsibility by the state or a redistribution of rights to the people (Mazé, 2013). In social and critical practices of art, design, and architecture, such questions are taken up in discussions about labor, or who does and (or) who benefits from such work (f.ex. Condorelli, 2009; Widenham et al., 2012). As such work may exceed that of traditional design practice, critical designers query the materiality of such work beyond the traditional 'object' of design to include a diverse array of artifacts found and created to organize, administrate, share and maintain the work (f.ex. Goggin, 2011). Such issues also surfaced

across these cases, in which we might understand the 'co' in co-production as performed by a variety of people and artifacts, 'who' and 'what', and how they have agency.

The set-up of each project framed how some of the work, responsibilities and benefits would be distributed. For example, in Living Bathing practices and Amplify, funding for researchers and credits for students, as well as associated deliverables, framed some of the roles and benefits for some of the participants. In DAIM, there was an attempt in the project setup to even out the conditions for the different collaborators, through establishing 'in kind' contributions of time, in which participating design consultants would spend some time in the research pilots and participating researchers would spend some time engaged in client projects. In Amplify, the conditions, stakes and commitments seemed more varied. In response, a contract was written between a designer and a non-profit to agree on their common starting points and to make explicit when and how they should connect during and after the project. As the designer expressed it, "it's under her name and my name, two individuals represented by two organizations... everything is also a creative commons license... an agreement about co-authorship." In these cases, the materiality of project plans and written contracts became a critical for actors with different conditions, stakes and benefits. The Amplify example further illustrates that such material forms of social contract are also an explicit part of design work, literally reconfiguring the traditional 'client-service' model of the profession by articulating roles and 'commons' in production.

While these materialities extend the (social) work of designing in social innovation to administration and regulation, other examples manifested and persisted more publically. The Concept House, for example, exhibits its co-production as a large-scale collage of partner logos on its exterior façade (Fig. 3, left). Perhaps contradicting this formal partnership, however, an interior wall prominently displays three separate control boxes to technology systems in the house (Fig. 3, right), exhibiting the apparently irreconcilable intellectual property owned by different partners. The outcome of DAIM was a toolkit in the form of a box (Fig. 2, left), distributed to all stakeholders for their future use in designing waste programs and policies. While I was told that the design and use of the box was co-produced and -rehearsed "maybe a hundred times", the box was nowhere in site when I visited and interviewed someone at Vaestforbrandning two years after the project finished. Instead, I was presented with a drawing of a range of spin-offs from the "DAIM wave" (Fig. 2, right), as he put it, including a bound set of information and training materials more specifically customized and branded for the waste authority. These are examples of the multiple forms that co-production manifest literally in design, in which different aspects are (re)produced or made in/visible in different forms. These may also reveal where and how forms of 'co' production may, or may not, hold, when and in what forms a particular 'who', an individual or organization, takes over, acts differently at different levels, times or places.

How the material traces of co-production appear, and disappear, also reveals aspects of 'what' has agency within the dynamics and flows of project activity over time and after they end. While the DAIM box disappeared at Vaestforbrandning and was stored away in the local municipal office, its contents and methods somehow reappeared in other forms. A participant in the municipality told me that, for her, the design outcome was not the toolkit itself but information materials and waste-bins staged within a consultation process marked by interim designs and an online forum through which they involved "ambassador families". She was clear that this wasn't to the extent of citizens taking the lead or co-design, but nonetheless a significant departure from established ways of program- and policy-making. Amplify also exhibited a range of materialities that had agency and persistence at different levels and in different places over time. The exhibition built up over the two weeks – it started quite bare, furnished mostly with videos produced from the

extensive qualitative interviews with local experts. These materials persist, on the website and as portable exhibition elements that might even be, as one participant put it, “franchised” for other exhibits, projects and audiences. The bulk of materials, however, were generated during the two weeks from student prototyping and ideation workshops organized by or with stakeholder organizations – though these seemed to disappear entirely at the end of the day or after the two weeks. An exception noted by one was the IKEA furniture, which was perhaps a convenient rather than a considered choice, with certain middle-class, mass-market and disposable associations. However, it was used at the non-profit long after and is planned to travel, as a kind of currency in socio-material form, to the next exhibition in partnership with other organizations in the Bronx.

These materialities, from considered social contracts and array of partner logos, to the production of technical-system interfaces and films, to the more mixed assembly of toolkit traces, documentation of other Amplify/DESI activities, mass-produced or ‘found’ equipment, complicates the notion of ‘co’ in co-production. These projects did not end with complete or final solutions, consensually produced on commonly-agreed terms among participants and partners. In these projects, designer’s work, and others’ work, and working together, was conditioned by diverse material artifacts, which set out and made visible and enduring some aspects. How these, and other materials, persisted, (dis-)appeared, changed form or were taken over or transferred by or between different actors, exhibits the more complex dynamics and socio-material flows perhaps characteristic of the organizational landscapes of co-production and of social innovation work. Co-production cannot be reduced here to a simple transfer of responsibility or rights from the state to citizen-consumers, nor a straightforward “collaboration between the state and the citizen”. Contributions, benefits, authorship and agency were unevenly spread, continually and sometimes only provisionally negotiated. ‘Who’ had agency in these projects was evident in different material forms (diagrams, contracts, facades, toolkits, films, etc.), in which ‘what’ was produced also took on different forms and acted in ways that was designed or intended, as artifacts continued to take on meanings and agency long after.

Conclusions

Social innovation, as I have framed it, marks a significant shift in how social problems and solutions are handled, and a potentially profound alteration in relations between the state and citizens. It poses a range of macropolitical questions, which I have not dwelled on here, such as the implications of redistributing such issues from producers to consumers and from the state to citizens. This may be variably be interpreted as failings of ‘big government’ or ‘big market’, in critiques of capitalism or nationalism, and it should be queried whether, for consumers and citizens, this represents the devolution of responsibilities or redistribution of rights (f.ex. Julier, 2007; Mazé, 2013). As long discussed in participatory design, however, this is not a polemic matter of ‘leave it to the experts’ versus ‘power to the people’ nor a simple matter of co-production on equal or consensual terms (Mazé, 2007). It is a question of how, where, by and for whom power – and consequent risk and responsibility – is handed over or taken up within pluricentric configurations of organizations and actors at different levels, across which resources and agency are not evenly distributed. As suggested by the cases, there are different ways of handling these political matters – social order(s) are (re)produced or (de)constructed in different ways – with different implications for how society might be reconfigured from within through social innovation.

In the discussion of the cases, questions of ‘commons’ and ‘co’-production open up for exploring the micropolitics of how social innovation might take place as spatialized and

materialized practices that situated different and evolving identity and group formations. Instead of presuming a 'commons', we might ask where and on who's terms somewhere in common might be located, created or imagined. The three projects used different methods for identifying how a particular place was framed as a common subject of analysis and research, how people with different roles and backgrounds were invited in, how they entered and identified themselves, if and how they had an agency in imagining alternatives and futures. As reflected upon by project participants, the activity of locating oneself, of relating to and moving between different socio-spatial locations, also took on conceptual and symbolic dimensions, as the (re)negotiation of subjectivities and accompanying associations with responsibilities and rights within particular situations. Further, we might ask about the 'co' of co-production. Querying 'what' forms this took in the projects revealed different ways in which social contracts were materialized, including contradictions within and across accounts. Beyond the traditional object of design, terms of (co-)production took on an array of forms (diagrams, contracts, facades, toolkits, films, furniture, etc.) with meanings that changed over time, that (dis-)appeared and persisted to different extents. In these variable and changeable forms, differences and (re)negotiation of benefits, authorship and agency became evident.

Social and environmental development, and its macropolitical implications evident in *Our Common Future*, is also at stake in the micropolitics of design roles in social innovation. In light of expanding design roles in society, this work is part of a longer project of generating, becoming sensitive to, sharing and testing concepts relevant to socially- and politically-engaged design and research practices. As part of my critical practice, asking questions reveals nuances, outsides and alternatives. Further, I hope to take part in opening up discourses and practices for imagining ways that design might be thought and done differently, in different forms and to different political effects.

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