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Towards actualizing the potential of design: change theories to inform critical design education

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Abstract: Critical design studies emerge as a field that frames design as central to confronting the most challenging socio-politico-environmental crises of our time. But faced with underwhelming evidence of these powers, more designers ask themselves: Can design really change the world? This letter briefly discusses the state of critical design and some of its detected limitations and argues that - perhaps along with less inflated expectations - designers need to become better at effectively promoting material socio-environmental change. Drawing from the concept of change theories - hypotheses informed by existing knowledge of how change happens - the author extrapolates three approaches from design scholars' and practitioners' work: minor gestures, institutional power and political orchestration, and internal capabilities. Finally, this letter argues that design education can prepare students to articulate better theories of change and increase the likelihood of affecting change by dynamically combining change theories with radical transdisciplinarity and design approaches.

Keywords: critical design, design education, change theories, socio-environmental change

Dear Design Educators,

Does your critical design program help students come out of grad school equipped to change the world for the better? Do your students stand a chance to actualize the promises of critical design when they enter "the real world"? If critical design can indeed help us create preferable futures, we must help students to become better at how to make it happen.

Critical design is one of the evolving edges of the design field. It can be characterized, on the one hand, by a belief that designing and designers are distinctively positioned to understand and intervene in complex systems to shift the most critical social and environmental challenges of our time. On the other hand, it also tries to examine design's roots in modernity, capitalism, and colonialism - and thus, confront its contribution to the problems it proposes to solve while finding alternative paths toward preferred futures (Mareis & Paim, 2021). In this emergent subfield, design dwells in contradiction, building on and rejecting its legacy at the same time while exploring, questioning, imagining, and fine-tuning the roles of designing and designers.

To realize its potential and help to promote material socio-politico-environmental transformation towards more equitable and sustainable futures, critical design practice would benefit from relying more on change theories - or informed hypotheses of how change happens - to navigate uncharted territories. Differently from long-established

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subfields of design, like architecture or graphic design, that involve more vocational and disciplinary training, critical
design requires radical transdisciplinarity and experimental design practices. Design education is positioned to
prepare designers to actualize change within their spheres of influence, by creating the conditions for students to
weave together rigorous transdisciplinary knowledge, change theories, and design approaches to inform more
effective theories of change for programs and interventions.

This letter is an invitation to reflect on critical design and consider how to prepare students better to affect material
change. Firstly, this letter briefly discusses the field of critical design. Secondly, it describes the concepts of change
theories and teases out three distinct approaches animating the work of design educators and practitioners: minor
gestures, institutional power and political orchestration, and internal capabilities. Finally, it considers the significance
of these change theories for design education.

This is an emerging investigation, and this letter represents a pause in a process rather than an end or resolution, and
this partial synthesis has an iterative character. This letter's main ambition is to bring to the fore some current
interplays of critical design, material change, and design pedagogy and open questions for further exploration. It
encourages dialogue between students, educators, practitioners, and change partners.

Towards a Critical Design Practice

Describing an increased disposition from designers worldwide to "engage more deeply than ever with the interrelated
crisis of climate, energy, poverty, inequality, and meaning," Arturo Escobar (2021) suggests the emergence of a
transnational critical design studies field where designers are "more inclined than ever to consider design as central to
the crisis and hence that it may be a crucial factor in confronting it, imaginatively and effectively." Escobar describes
"design for social innovation, transition design, design towards sustainment, and redesigning the human as compelling
expressions of this critical awareness and disposition."

While many designers frame design as capable - even crucial to - confronting the urgent crises of our time, the
question of how this potential is actualized is still being investigated by practitioners and academics. Panthea Lee, a
practitioner working at the intersection of social justice and participatory democracy, maintains that designers "do a
great job of talking about what needs to change, but a poor job of articulating how we get our designs, our ideas, our
initiatives adopted by institutions with power and resources" (Shea, 2022).

Although the notion that designing has a unique potential to promote change is widely accepted, at least among a
community of designers, getting some perspective and modulating design discourse, practice, and education can be
helpful. Some scholars point to an inflated self-perception of designing and designers' power, concomitant to a clear
departure from mastering technical skills that characterized design (de Matos, 2022). Leitão and Noel (2022) point out
that social design discourse started to gain momentum in the early 2000s, yet "after two decades of bold claims, we
have to recognize that design's impact was limited at best - even if there are success stories. Moreover, significant
social changes in the last two decades were not initiated by designers".

Some practitioners depart from framing their transformational work as design altogether. In Design for Social
Innovation, Gabriela Gomez-Mont, former chief creative officer for Mexico City and founder of Laboratorio para la
Ciudad, clarifies that "The Lab never thought of itself as a design-fronted lab (...) So we never really thought of the Lab
as a design space per se but rather a transdisciplinary space that looked for urban and social transformation, that
gathered diverse communities around common questions, where design was just one of our tools". In the same vein,
Indy Johar, co-founder of Project 00 and Dark Matter Labs and senior innovation associate at the Young Foundation,
points out that value is created when practitioners are able to connect "different sorts of flows and to arrange them in
particular forms" but that these activities are not "restricted to an architect, a designer, or the field of design." Johar
proposes a redefinition from a focus on practice to a focus on mission: "We would have deeper conversations as a
result" (Shea, 2022).

Afonso de Matos (2022) highlights the discrepancies between the critical design content students work through in a
design MA program and the job market they will enter as graduates. De Matos highlights designers' socio-economic
conditions and the likelihood of doing commercial work, sometimes under precarious, unregulated conditions, in
contrast with the lofty aspirations of design graduate school. In addition to that, De Matos questions designers' access
to power to promote change and the lack of openness in the job market for critical design. The author considers the
imaginative and political implications of critical design's departure from the disciplinary aspects of design.
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Design seems dematerialized from a profession grounded in the mastering of specific technical skills into more of an attitude, a way of engaging with the world. (...). Why do we devalue technical proficiency as a lowly affair? And what are the implications of this shift for how we conceive our own horizons of political action? Why do we think of ourselves more as creatives which can act upon the world through our design practices, rather than as workers which don’t have that much agency when working under someone’s orders? (de Matos, 2021)

These disciplinary, transdisciplinary, and post-disciplinary considerations open space to advance the dialogue about critical design practice, how to make change more likely to happen and how design education can better prepare students to actualize the potential of design in their practices.

Change Theories

If we embrace the possibility of design to help promote more equitable and sustainable futures - even while considering challenges and limitations - figuring out the hows becomes crucial. The concept of change theories might be helpful.

Several transformation projects, design-led or not, rely on theories of change to articulate interventions and their expected results toward a particular goal. In the context of systemic change projects in STEM higher education, Reinholz and Andrews (2020) propose the concept of change theories to inform theories of change. The authors argue that drawing on the existing research and theory about how change occurs increases the likelihood of successful change initiatives.

Change theory and research can help a team recognize important preconditions and why it will be necessary to achieve them on the path to the long term outcome. Drawing on diverse work is crucial for developing a theory of change with preconditions and rationales that are based on more than our own intuition about how to achieve change. (Reinholz & Andrews, 2020, p6).

For example, Reinholz and Andrews discuss how scientist-teachers respond to evidence-based teaching practices. Although it would be expected that scientists look forward to adopting proven teaching practices, research shows that faculty rely much more on personal experiences than empirical evidence. Hence, seemingly reasonable assumptions might be misleading. Reinholz and Andrews propose drawing on pertinent existing research and knowledge about how change happens to inform the outlining of all elements of theories of change, including describing the context, outlining preconditions and rationale, defining indicators, designing interventions, and framing assumptions.

Change Theories in Critical Design Work

As an attempt to think through the intersections of change theories, critical design work, and design education, I briefly tease three distinctive approaches that operate at different scales: minor gestures, institutional power and political orchestration, and internal capabilities (Fig.1).

This is an initial attempt rather than a comprehensive exercise, and further research on the scholar and empirical knowledge from the design field of how systemic socio-politico-environmental change happens is required. The examples listed here are extrapolated from published work on design scholars’ and practitioners’ praxis and represent my partial interpretation of that work. Furthermore, these examples are not exclusive of each other - rather, they suggest a breadth of change theories that, more or less explicitly, animate design interventions and can be combined in different ways.

Minor Gestures

Abdullah and Oliveira (2023) propose the minor gesture as a subversive and potentially undetectable way to counter a politics of insurmountability. In the context of colonialism, they affirm that its “most insidious violence is to constantly paint itself as insurmountable”. The authors point out that the notion that change can only happen through grand gestures and “all-encompassing power sweeps” tends to be paralyzing, and that, although vital, pursuing meaningful structural change can lead to a feeling of powerlessness.

The minor gesture comes in as a stance to counter feelings of powerlessness and paralysis. Defined as “localized, subversive acts,” minor gestures “can be a way of destructuring and disarming that which seems inevitable to escape from” and an approachable place to start a pathway towards structural, systemic change. (Abdullah & Oliveira, 2023)
**Institutional Power and Political Orchestration**

Panthea Lee focuses on institutions with power and the orchestration of political debates and collaboration processes. Lee points out that designers working in social design tend to target individual projects and avoid big institutions and governments out of caution that they are too complicated to understand, and difficult to change. However, that means scale tends to be smaller and impact limited. The practitioner asks, "Then, how do we actually design, co-create, and build the sorts of institutions and systems that we want, that then can be the platforms and vehicles for the worlds we want to create?" (Shea, 2022)

Lee points to using design tools and understanding of systems to identify problems and leverage points, and act on them. She emphasizes the importance of looking for political and social windows of opportunity and cultivating the ability to identify these windows that are fleeting and "usually not obvious to the design and innovation crowd." The practitioner describes the opportunities for intervention as spaces of contested politics, where conditions for dialogue have to be carefully created.

I see now in various spaces I work in that people are quick to embrace co-creation and co-design, but these terms are often misunderstood as throwing a bunch of people into a room and hoping for magic, which doesn’t just happen naturally. We need to sequence political debates and structure collaborations very carefully if we want to make something real and lasting. (Panthea Lee, in Shea, 2022 p. 341)

**Internal Capabilities**

Grocott (2023) states that "shifts in individual and community thinking can contribute to the dismantling of the structures that might limit our sense of collective agency and self-determination." Grocott focuses on transformative learning, a practice she describes as "relational at its core." The scholar points to abilities that require internal competence like unlearning, self-awareness, trust, engagement, power sharing, and the ability to hold space - for not knowing, sacrificial prototypes, and not jumping into action prematurely.

The author acknowledges that the internal work happens in the context of dominant structures and power imbalances and cannot, alone, transform societal norms. However, she reminds us that mindsets are a powerful systemic change leverage.

If you are familiar with the iceberg model of systems thinking, then envisage that the focus on individual mindsets and collective mental models sits below patterns of behavior, below systems structures. We are attending here to the very bottom of the iceberg, the place where, arguably, change can have the greatest leverage to transform what lies above. (Grocott, 2023, p. 20)
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Considerations for Design Education

Theories of change are a widespread framework meant to help stakeholders understand the rationale for interventions, expected outcomes, and how they lead to long-term goals (Reinholz and Andrews, 2020). They are iterative and serve as a dynamic blueprint for planning, implementing, and assessing an initiative. But if they are articulated too casually, they risk becoming superficial exercises based on conceptual leaps or individual assumptions - or even a posteriori justification.

Incorporating change theories as part of critical design education can help students be more grounded in existing knowledge about socio-politico-environmental change and create better-informed theories of change for their design interventions - which will ultimately increase the likelihood of affecting positive change in the world.

There is an opportunity to weave existing knowledge while also uncovering the new perspectives, insights, and possibilities revealed by more experimental design-led research and interventions. One way to conceptualize it is as a dynamic combination of disciplinary knowledges, change theories and design tools, methods, mindsets, and approaches that inform a theory of change (Fig.2). Critical design education can teach these elements separately, and, most importantly, how combined, they create generative approaches.
Figure 2 - Informed theories of change: Along with radically transdisciplinary knowledge and experimental design approaches, change theories can help inform more effective and generative theories of change.

Conclusion

While critical design continues to grow as a promising field, its ability to promote material socio-politico and environmental change remains to be fully demonstrated.

Design education can play an important role in better preparing students to actualize critical design’s promise "in the real world." Change theories may suggest meaningful fields and intersections for investigation and experimentation, supporting stronger projects and interventions more likely to affect meaningful change.

The change theories proposed in this letter - minor gestures, institutional power and political orchestration, and internal capabilities - are an initial attempt to describe how change informed by critical design happens and further investigation is necessary to systematize other change theories. Beyond that, change theories from other fields of knowledge should also be considered as part of a transdisciplinary approach.

Informed change theories can have a positive impact in the design education process itself by making the studio experience more robust. When projects go beyond aiming to "raise awareness" or create an app that will (magically) end social inequality or reverse the climate crisis, and gets in the weeds of institutional power and political orchestration, mapping systems and stakeholders and identifying windows of opportunity, the whole learning community benefits through peer learning. When critique helps students think through the difference between a minor gesture that can open a path for systemic change versus a bandaid on a broken system, designers have a chance to give a truly unique contribution. When faculty nurtures a program-wide culture that reflects the internal capabilities that make for potent critical design, students have a contained space to practice new ways of thinking and being.
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By explicitly teaching change theories, design educators can help students to become better prepared intellectually, emotionally, and technically to design more robust theories of change - a small but hopefully meaningful contribution to help realize design's potential to change the world for the better.

References


About the Author

Cristina Beraldo is a Brazilian-American design researcher, strategist and educator with fifteen years of experience in organization and learning design to support change processes. She recently earned an MFA in Transdisciplinary Design from Parsons School of Design and currently is a part-time faculty member in the School of Design Strategies at Parsons.