

Starting a Feminist Design Think Tank

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doi: 10.21606/pluriversal.2020.015

This short paper explores my work to start a Feminist Design Think Tank that will address wicked socio-economic problems through feminist technology. I introduce the thinking behind the initiative and reflections and recent work since presenting the idea at Pivot 2020. The proposed Think Tank will bring together members from different design fields and working in different countries and contexts to engage in applied design and research through design projects. Built on feminist foundations itself, the Think Tank will create a counter narrative in design, breaking from problematic foundations and norms such as presumed professional neutrality that excludes many voices, forms of knowledge and aesthetics including the female and feminine, understood in their broadest and intersectional forms. Work in the Think Tank will be rooted in an alternative economy and support social and economic sustainability through the feminist lenses applied to practice. The Think Tank will contribute socially and theoretically through its many applied research projects and through the structure of the Think Tank itself, an experiment in new design economies and applied feminist design practice.

Feminist design; socio-economic sustainability; alternative economies; wellbeing

1. Introduction

My talk at Pivot 2020 explored my work to start a Feminist Design Think Tank. The aim of this presentation was to discuss the idea with other design researchers, challenge and build-on the research plan, and potentially find new collaborators. This short paper introduces the thinking behind the initiative, my post-conference reflections and the work that has happened since the conference.

My vision for the Think Tank is based on a critique of mainstream industrial design practice and my value for feminist perspectives in industrial design informed by my previous research on the topic (see Prochner, 2018; Prochner & Marchand, 2018). Broadly speaking, the proposed Feminist Design Think Tank will address wicked socio-economic problems through feminist technology. It will help create a



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counter narrative in design and highlight new possibilities, breaking from some patterns of inequity, exclusion and exploitation and supporting different values through design practice and outputs. The Feminist Design Think Tank will be a space to bring together design and research projects where designer-members could collaborate on a project or work on their own. I'd like this to be a broad collaboration with members from different design fields and working in different countries and contexts.

I'm an assistant professor of industrial and interaction design at Syracuse University, USA. Originally from Montreal, Canada, I bring a Western and professional perspective to my work and draw on feminist and queer thinking. My research and practice focus on socially and community-oriented industrial design. This includes an emphasis on critical and feminist work as well as regional design practice and professional communities. Considering the limits of my perspective—and any single perspective for that matter—work in the think tank must be collaborative! In addition to incorporating a variety of perspectives and knowledge, collaboration will allow the group to build-on ideas, work together on projects and share work with each other and at conferences and in publications.

2. My vision for the Think Tank

At its core, the Feminist Design Think Tank will address wicked socio-economic problems through feminist technology, artefacts that “enhance women’s ability to develop, expand, and express their capacities” (Layne, 2010, p. 3). The Think Tank will have similarities to cooperatives and initiatives like Matrix, Dyke Action Machine!, Fempower.tech and feminist hackerspaces and makerspaces. It will offer a contemporary space and community for feminist design work, positioned between design practice and design research. The work in this Think Tank will align with initiatives like critical design and design activism while working hard to avoid the inaccessibility of some critical design (see, for example, Prado, 2014) and paternalistic approaches seen in some social justice by design work like Design for the Other 90%.

The Think Tank will engage in applied design and ‘research through design’ projects on topics of interest to members where members will work from their own feminist perspectives. In planning the Think Tank and with every project, the group will engage in self-reflection about positionality and privilege, work to avoid the role of executor of transformation in design (Onafuwa, 2018), and be reflective about culture, relationships, risk, precarity and impact (Akama & Yee, 2019).

The think tank is a reaction against problematic foundations and norms in industrial design, my professional/academic background. This includes the presumed neutrality of design, while, at the same time, excluding many voices, forms of knowledge and aesthetics including the female and feminine, understood in their broadest and intersectional forms. The think tank is also a reaction to the emphasis in industrial design on growth, high resource use and over consumption and related inequities, exclusions and exploitations (see, for example, Boehnert, 2018).

The Feminist Design Think tank promises to help create a counter narrative and highlight new possibilities in design, breaking from patterns of inequity, exclusion and exploitation and supporting different values through design practice and outputs. The work will be rooted in an alternative economy including projects based at universities and projects rooted in alternative organizations, businesses or ways of working. Alternative economies include “politically motivated differentiations from the mainstream economy” like design work in the public sector, non-profit organisations, grassroots businesses, makerspaces, and designers engaged in creative time banking, fair-trade and open-source work (Julier, 2017, p. 123).

Broadly speaking, feminist perspectives identify systemic problems in industrial design based on the presence of power and masculinity, unequal power dynamics between people and negative situations facing women. They encourage grass-roots changes in the field that rely on actor interventions drawing on women's perspectives and/or feminist perspectives. Through my past research, I found that feminist perspectives in industrial design often support:

- Emphasizing human life and flourishing over output and growth
- Following best practices in labor/ international production /trade
- Choosing an empowering workspace
- Engaging in non-hierarchical/ interdisciplinary/ collaborative work
- Addressing user needs at multiple levels, including support for pleasure/ fun/ happiness
- Creating thoughtful products for female users
- Creating good jobs through production/ execution/ sale of the design solution
- Among other things ...

So, in addition to countering problematic foundations and norms in design, the work in this Think Tank will have value in its own right, supporting social sustainability through a focus on women/user needs/health/diversity/quality of life and economic sustainability through an emphasis on accountability and transparency in work and through fair labor and job creation.

3. Post-conference reflections and current work

I was thrilled by the reception of the project at Pivot 2020. Many conference participants joined the initiative. We've been working together to plan the next steps of the project and have our first virtual meeting coming up. There is particular interest within the group to use the Think Tank to share resources and have feminist discussions.

At this point, the Think Tank will be a space for dialogue to explore feminist issues in relation to design; an opportunity to meet new colleagues and initiate projects; and a space to share research projects and get feedback on work. This will take place through a virtual community with a discussion board, regular meetings and eventual larger-scale events like design showcases, co-publications, and conferences.

The group is growing and welcoming new members. Email me at iprochne@syr.edu if you're interested in getting involved. I'm excited to see where this project will take us.

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About the Author:

Isabel Prochner is a Canadian/Quebecois design researcher from Montreal. She brings a Western perspective to her work and draws on feminist and queer thinking. She also has a passion for making and craft. Her research and practice focus on socially and community-oriented industrial design. This includes an emphasis on critical and feminist work, as well as regional design practice and professional communities. Prochner holds a PhD in environmental design and works as an assistant professor of industrial and interaction design at Syracuse University in Syracuse, USA. She is also the online editor for the Design Research Society (DRS).