

Design Education and Social Innovation

(Introduction)

Scott Townsend
Associate Professor
Department of Graphic Design

NC State University
Box 7701, Brooks Hall
Raleigh, NC, USA
27695-7701

email: sttwn@earthlink.net

tel: h 919-828-8303/w 919-515-8337

With this issue, *Design and Culture* begins a recurring section on design education and practice. Our first theme is “design education and social innovation,” and comes at a time when local needs and global challenges converge with design discourse, academia, and design practices in topical and important new ways.

In 2012, the Cooper-Hewitt, along with the NEA and the Lemelson Foundation, convened a “Social Impact Design Summit” (Lasky 2013). One important aspect brought to light by the summit was the lack of a single clear definition, set of metrics, or general agreement on what various terms mean. For example, “public-interest design,” “social design,” “social impact design,” “socially responsive design,” “transformation design,” and “humanitarian design” are all listed in the white paper as falling within the definition. In the Executive Summary, “social impact” was then defined as “...one term that refers to the practice of design for the public good, especially in disadvantaged communities” (6). Social impact/social responsibility emerged as a working definition during the summit, but problems remain with regard to defining a particular discipline, educational framework, form of practice, or research methodology.

In our original call, we decided on the term “social innovation,” (which is the emphasis in most of the upcoming articles), relying on the current definition adopted by Ezio Manzini, founder of DESIS: Design for Social Innovation towards Sustainability, a network of university-based design labs:

For me, dealing with the needed sustainable changes that are mainly cultural and behavior change, the pivotal moment has been when I moved from saying “What can I do to help people change behavior?” toward the discovery that a lot of people (even if they aren’t yet so visible) had already changed, and in a good way, their behaviors. And that therefore, the right question is: “What can I do to trigger and support these new ways of thinking and doing? How can I use my design knowledge and tools to empower these grass-roots social innovations? ... in other words, if you don’t recognize that design can also be strategic you cannot imagine that design can play an important role in triggering, supporting and scaling-up social innovation.”

-Interview with Manzini on “design and social innovation.” (Brooks 2011)

In this issue, Terry Irwin outlines an educational, research and practice strategy in “Transition Design: A Proposal for a New Area of Design Practice, Study & Research.” Irwin proposes transition design as a logical development from service design, as a systems-based way of “designing experiences;” to design for social innovation, which (echoing Manzini), “leverages or amplifies under-utilized resources” for emerging paradigms and alternative economic systems; to transition design, evolving future lifestyle-based solutions that synthesize and consolidate the strategies of the first two in order to “challenge existing paradigms, envision new ones and lead to radical positive social and environmental change.” This article introduces the revised program at Carnegie Mellon University, where Irwin is also head of the School of Design.

The next issue will follow up on Irwin’s proposal and continue our focus on design education and social innovation with a range of short position papers by design educators, based on their own educational

practices, drawn from multiple—yet to a great extent “local”—experiences world-wide.

References

Brooks, Sarah. 2011. “ Design for Social Innovation: an Interview with Ezio Manzini.” *Shareable*.

Available online: <http://www.shareable.net/blog/design-for-social-innovation-an-interview-with-ezio-manzini>.

Lasky, Julie. 2013. *Design and Social Impact, a white paper based on the “Social Impact Design Summit,” a convening by the Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum; the National Endowment for the Arts; and the Lemelson Foundation at The Rockefeller Foundation offices in New York on February 27, 2012*. New York: Cooper Hewitt.