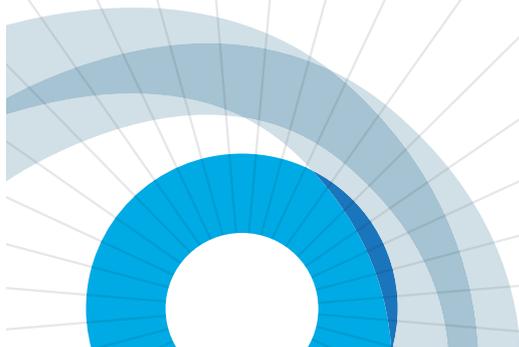


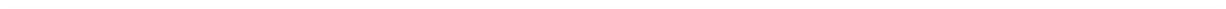
# Design Thinking and the Big Society: From solving personal troubles to designing social problems

**An essay exploring what Design can offer those working  
on social problems and how it needs to change**

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# Summary

Over the past decade “Design Thinking” has gained currency, initially within design agencies and their commercial work, in design education, and now within the public and third sector. Design Thinking, as a methodology, it is claimed, solves problems – no matter what they are, no matter how hard. In the context of a wide-ranging critique of public service provision as costly, bureaucratic and often ineffective it is hardly surprising that some are looking to Design as the perfect partner for the Big Society. In this essay we start by outlining the similarities between Design Thinking and the Big Society. Our attention then shifts to the messy and complex world of social problems and the potential of Design Thinking to intervene. We draw a distinction between the personal troubles of individuals and social problems, and argue that for Design Thinking to work within the latter, it needs to expand its conceptual toolbox. We argue for a refocus away from coming up with solutions to designing problems: for Design to actively, purposefully and reflexively participate in the making and molding of social problems. We then examine some of the features of Design that make it a strong candidate for being involved in such an activity as well as explore the demands that this will inevitably make on Design and designers.

# Introduction

“Give us any problem and we can help you solve it!” This is the claim of Design Thinking, an idea that has accompanied the recent expansion of Design from being mostly concerned with industrial manufacturing, architecture and visual communication to a concern with designing out social problems. Design is now recognised as being a special kind of creative problem-solving. The incorporation of Design Thinking over the past decade into fields as diverse as international development, healthcare, public service design and disarmament has spread the idea that how designers go about problem-solving is equally relevant to communities, public organisations and governments, as it is to the commercial and business sectors. Its advocates and supporters are influential and diverse. The Gates Foundation,<sup>1</sup> the Danish government,<sup>2</sup> the NHS,<sup>3</sup> the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research<sup>4</sup> and the US Army,<sup>5</sup> as well as individual political scientists and senior civil servants,<sup>6</sup> have all argued that a Design-based approach can play an important role in the design and delivery of public services and social welfare.<sup>7</sup>

In the UK Design Thinking shares affinities with the Big Society agenda, which, for now, remains an organising concept within the coalition government. Like Design Thinking, the Big Society is concerned with practical approaches to getting things done and makes claims about being inclusive, participative and local. Arguably Design Thinking provides the Big Society with a method and a set of tools to help achieve its stated goals of a more local, transparent, less investment-hungry and more resilient society in which citizens take control of their own fortunes and decide on what matters to them without Big Government getting in the way.<sup>8</sup> In return the Big Society might give Design and designers a voice at the Policy Making table.

However we wonder whether this seemingly happy union brushes over something important, specifically how particular issues become **social** problems in the first place.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, we want to surface the power of Design to contribute to the making and molding of social problems. As we will demonstrate, any attempt to produce a simple and unequivocal description or definition of a particular social problem is likely to fail. Social problems are **social** not simply because they affect many people but because their shape or characteristics are constructed by and involved in constructing the world we live in – they are contested and fought over, just as they are specific to a particular time and place.<sup>10</sup> We argue that Design has to reclaim the value that it places on making social problems visible, understandable and graspable, reminiscent of the stance of earlier generations of designers such as Victor Papanek who saw their work as a kind of social activism. This refocuses Design from being principally about problem-solving, to being involved, crucially, in how problems are framed and shared. In a context in which designers are now being invited in to help solve complex, messy problems with high social impacts, this means Design has the potential to play an important role in making issues public. However, such an agenda raises fundamental challenges for the practice and profession of Design.

# Background

Over the last decade the term Design Thinking spread from professional Design to a range of other contexts in which designers found themselves working. Even though some of its early evangelists now claim it is dead,<sup>11</sup> it became a useful catchphrase to describe the transition from Design being concerned with making and styling products, to a capability for innovation. However despite its popularity Design Thinking is nonetheless not well understood so it is worth exploring its origins. Part of the history comes from academic studies of professional designers from the 1960s onwards including a book by Peter Rowe (1987), a paper by Dick Buchanan (1992) and several symposia starting with one organized by Nigel Cross, Norbert Roozenburg and Kees Dorst (1992).<sup>12</sup> But around 2002, the increasing dialogue between Tim Brown, CEO of the influential design firm, IDEO, and Roger Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management in Toronto, resulted in both them writing books about Design Thinking published in 2009<sup>13</sup> (although what these books describe as Design Thinking is not the same thing). Some universities began to promote Design Thinking as a way for students from different fields to come together to collaborate such as the Stanford d-school and Design London, a joint venture between the Royal College of Art and Imperial College.<sup>14</sup> UK government bodies charged with promoting design and innovation such as the Design Council began to use the term. As interest and investment in professional non-engineering Design spread,<sup>15</sup> the contexts in which this approach could be used also proliferated from challenges such as making the NHS more innovative<sup>16</sup> to supporting social enterprise. Design Thinking is heralded as being able “to develop better solutions to social problems”.<sup>17</sup>

The trajectory of the Big Society is rather shorter. One of its first expressions was Prime Minister David Cameron’s description in May 2010 shortly after taking office, when he said “We want to give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want”.<sup>18</sup> Key concepts being mobilised by the interpreters of this emerging policy direction include localism, empowerment and innovation. Even in its short history, the term has generated considerable debate. Although yet to be developed, or translated and tested locally, the Big Society is being advanced by some as having the potential to result in “a different settlement between government and civil society”.<sup>19</sup>

Like Design Thinking, the term Big Society is novel but somehow familiar. It reflects a number of ideas that were already circulating, such as social enterprise or participatory budgeting, but stakes out an area that is inclusive enough to absorb those too. Initial efforts to enact the Big Society agenda from the top down include pilots for Participatory Budgeting in 16 areas, a Big Society Bank to finance social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups; and the creation of a National Citizen Service programme.

Quite how Design Thinking and the Big Society came to resemble one another so closely is not our focus. However even on a brief inspection, there are important similarities:

- (1) Both stake their legitimacy on local knowledge and local action. For Design Thinking, the approach to Design rests on knowledge of a context in which a project will be realised, rather than a top-down approach from elsewhere, whereas the Big Society sees local citizens as crucially involved in making local decisions in response to local problems.
- (2) Both claim to be centred on people, arguing for an ideal of human-centred rather than technology-centred Design, in the case of Design Thinking, and reorganising the state to be citizen-centred, not state centred, in the case of the Big Society. These shifts imply a change in where power is located, even if this is not made explicit.
- (3) Both claim to offer a new way to create systemic or radical change and thereby solve or ameliorate social problems. In the case of Design Thinking, the emphasis is on a participatory, iterative, creative process to stimulate innovation by asking “what if” questions, whereas in the case of the Big Society, it is a shift towards a new set of relations between local people, local organisations and central government.
- (4) Both have confidence in the ability of non-experts to be creative and solve problems in a context of constraints. Design thinkers involve users and stakeholders in co-design to help generate, test or legitimise ideas. Fresh ways of thinking, and even naivety, are encouraged. The Big Society agenda likewise seems to value local knowledge over and above that of experts within bureaucratic organisations.
- (5) Both claim to be practical and agile, eschewing lengthy formal analysis privileging gut-feel action.
- (6) Both share an entrepreneurial ‘can-do’ mentality, enshrined for example in the weight given to ‘optimism’ as a core value within the Design Thinking Approach.

Given these important synergies it would seem to make sense that Design Thinking has something important to offer communities trying to tackle social problems. However these core characteristics also present some important issues which we will now move on to explore.

# Social problems or personal troubles?

On April 27<sup>th</sup> 2010 David Cameron made a speech describing what he called Britain's Broken Society and advocating, as its antidote, the Big Society.<sup>20</sup> As evidence of how Britain is a broken society he provided a long list of what he called, "social problems" including poverty, lack of social mobility, teenage pregnancy, family breakdown, violence against the person, drug addiction, anti-social behaviour and unemployment. By any standards this was a wide-ranging list of some complex, deleterious and long-standing issues.

Arguably it is precisely for these same reasons that some are looking to Design Thinking to provide solutions. In this same speech David Cameron talked of a Big Government characterised by a "hyperactive", "monolithic, inhuman clumsy and distant state" which "only treats the symptoms of our social problems, not their causes". For Cameron, the state is actually making things worse not better, for as it becomes "bigger, more dictatorial, more intrusive, it has taken away from people the belief and desire to do things for themselves, for their families and for their neighbours".<sup>21</sup> In contrast Design Thinking approaches are commonly advanced as being practical, real, concrete, entrepreneurial and agile, and most important of all "human-centred" or "user-centred". Whilst it seems like Design Thinking may soon have its feet under the policy table, our concern is whether in its current form, user-centeredness, and therefore Design Thinking, is quite up to the job when faced with social problems as distinct from individual, personal troubles.

To explain, Design Thinking is closely aligned with user-centred approaches to design research. Commonly these loosely resemble an ethnographic, interpretative style. This can be seen, for example, in a recent paper on social innovation co-authored by Tim Brown, a leading advocate of Design Thinking.<sup>22</sup> The paper opens with a case study on the development of a water purification plant in India. They tell of how a woman – they call her Shanti – fetches water daily from a local well. Although this water periodically makes her family sick she continues to use it, as opposed to the water from a nearby community-run treatment plant. Brown and Wyatt are able to explain Shanti's behaviour thanks to the user-centred approach. For example, they point to the size of the jerrycan that the community-run plant insists that she uses; the shape of the can; the plant's opening hours and its payment system. Whilst the treatment centre works for some, Brown and Wyatt argue that an opportunity has been missed "to design an even better system because they failed to consider the culture and needs of all of the people living in the community."

Time and again, initiatives falter because they are not based on the client's or customer's needs.... Even when people do go into the field, they may enter with preconceived notions of what the needs and solutions are. This flawed approach remains the norm in both the business and social sectors.<sup>23</sup>

Brown and Wyatt are therefore critical on two counts. First, that not everyone's needs within the community have been considered. Second, that the designers of the treatment centre failed to go beyond their own preconceived notions of the users' needs.

Without wanting to enter into a critique of the pervasive and largely uncritical use of the term “needs”, one thing is clear – these needs are not immediately self-evident. As we see from this account, the design researcher has to adopt another position, if they are to see a less distorted view of reality and tap into the true needs of the user. Reminiscent of the “proletarian standpoint” of Marx, Engels and Lukács, the logic is that if one can go beyond the “master’s” partial and perverse vision of reality, and adopt the standpoint of the other, then an empirically more accurate description will be achieved. In this way it is common for design researchers working within Design Thinking, to narrate stories from the standpoint of the user, claiming them as true. As the above quote demonstrates, this works to consign other accounts to the status of ideology. It is on the basis of these truths that the Design Thinking process can proceed, from insight to idea generation to prototyping.

Personal stories, within the Design Thinking method, are there to incite Design. Once narrated and heard the design team will proceed to the next stage of the process. In this way stories are narrated and situated within a pre-determined and established framework which will hopefully surprise and sometimes shock but will **always** conclude that something needs to be done. To return to the example above, one cannot walk away from Shanti and her troubles associated with collecting water. Action must be taken and a design solution must be developed which will allow her to tell a different, more positive, story in the future. For as the optimism imperative of Design Thinking requires, a design intervention is always possible and preferable to no design intervention and withdrawal.

Central to the Design Thinking methodology is therefore connecting personal stories with a need for action. Such a strategy is in no way limited to Design Thinking. It is a common rhetorical device. David Cameron, for example, opened his 2010 speech describing the events leading up to the killing of Ben Kinsella and the case of Sofyen Belamouadden: “He was the boy who was chased into Victoria Station by a gang of school children and stabbed in front of crowds of commuters”. For David Cameron, these stories are his starting point. From here he proceeds to provide a particular analysis that relates to the structure of the state, the workings of community and the rights responsibilities and values of individuals. Whether or not you agree with his argument, he is providing an analysis of social problems, as **social**, in that it works across a number of different levels: the individual, family, community and state. Likewise the interventions that he presents for these problems work on a number of levels: both structural (reducing what he calls Big Government) and personal (increasing personal responsibility).

As we trawl through the Design Thinking literature we struggle to find a philosophical or theoretical schema that will allow us to operate across multiple levels, or put another way, to situate individuals within dynamic social systems. Arguably Design Thinking’s obsession with the individual user will result in an analysis skewed towards the character of the individual, their skills and their immediate opportunities. What we’ll miss is the ability to “grasp the interplay of individuals and society, of biography and history, of self and world”.<sup>24</sup> For as C Wright Mills commented:

....consider unemployment. When, in a city of 100,000, only one is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the individual, his skills and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million people are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the

society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.<sup>25</sup>

Some might argue that it is this focus on the individual and ensuing ideas of personal responsibility that have made Design Thinking chime so well with the political ideology underpinning The Big Society. In contrast we call for Design Thinking to take seriously the **social** in social problems and develop its conceptual toolbox accordingly. Our special pleading revolves around three core arguments.

First, each social problem has a specific and traceable history or biography. Returning to the disparate list of “social problems” provided by David Cameron, we may well find ourselves asking, what is it that all of these social problems share beyond the fact of their designation as social problems? The literature on the study of social problems points to the centrality of values in adjudicating on what is deemed to be a social problem. In short, a social problem might be thought of as a situation that is incompatible with a particular set of values. Immediately questions arise as to whose values, and therefore how different people consider different things to be social problems. Note how David Cameron’s list does not include glue-sniffing, joy-riding, road deaths or even, perhaps, banker bonuses. Our point here is that the definitional process of what issues come to the fore at particular times, and how, is itself a worthy and valuable topic for research and design.

Second, social problems are closely related to social movements and the interplay between resource mobilisation, the making of meaning and identity politics. This perspective has been developed within what is termed new social movement theory. This argues that we’ve moved from a position where power is closely related to the economic means of production, to an information society where power is related to the access, control and distribution of information. As Alberto Melucci writes:

The contemporary shift towards symbolic and informational resources bears thus on our definition of power and inequality as well. Inequality cannot be measured solely in terms of distribution and control of economic resources [...]; analysis of structural imbalances in society should refer more to a differentiation of positions which allots to some a greater and specific control over the master codes, over those powerful symbolic resources that frame the information. There are organizers of information directing its flow which are more powerful, more stable than others; they ‘inform’ a wider portion of the field, they are keys to other information. The access to these primary codes is not distributed randomly and it corresponds to a distribution of social positions of power.<sup>26</sup>

A clear and recent example of such a movement is Uncut,<sup>27</sup> the disparate collection of campaigning groups and their concern with ownership, control and distribution of information. In addition, the Uncut movement also demonstrates a self-reflexive form of action in that their protest action is also the message. Consider for example the Uncut activist standing in the shop window of Dorothy Perkins, impersonating a manikin, whilst wearing a ‘tax dodger’ t-shirt. In short, social problems represent sites where meanings are created and contested and this is a social process.

Third, social problems frequently have a personal or private dimension as well as being issues of public concern. Although often taken as somehow self-evidently distinct spheres it is necessary to see how they are indelibly intertwined, working as powerful processes. For example, domestic violence is often viewed as relating to the interior, interpersonal or psychological world of the family. This would most likely result in interventions based on developing better communication skills, stress release or perhaps cognitive behavioural

techniques. Feminist activists from the 1970s onwards, however, campaigned to expose men's violence against women as violence and therefore a criminal activity. In so doing they therefore were able to make demands for public intervention from agencies such as the police and the criminal justice system. In this way feminism reconceptualised domestic violence as a manifestation of men's power over women, throughout patriarchal society. We therefore argue that "private troubles" and "public issues" collide and intersect – they cannot be thought about except in relation to one another.

Each of the arguments presented above relates to the more general requirement for Design Thinking to attend to the ways in which humans actively create and participate in larger social structures or systems and the ways in which these structures, in turn, shape human actions. John Sherry, writing about commercial ethnography, makes the point well:

[T]his process of (dis)individuation of the consumer, the fascination with the representative individual, tells only half the story. Our actions, values and desires can rarely be interpreted aside from these larger systems that shape them, and are shaped by them. Our participation in broader social systems is inherently productive, if only of meaning. And, ... the description of how communities or other collectives function is a different task than describing the practices of individuals within those systems. Unless we do both, we're only telling half the story.<sup>28</sup>

We have argued that user-centred approaches, as conceptualized within Design Thinking, can provide a partial account of personal troubles as opposed to insight into social problems. But we have also pointed to the way in which social problems are constructed through the interplay of diverse social actors. We believe this opens up a new and creative space for Design. Rather than claiming to solve social problems, we want to argue for the relevance and value of Design in actively, critically and reflexively contributing to their construction. We want to suggest the adoption of a radical constructionist account of social problems<sup>29</sup> which, rather than concentrating on solving or for that matter identifying particular problematic social conditions, is concerned with "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions".<sup>30</sup> Following this approach, designers' attention will shift to focus on claims, and the activities of claimsmakers. Who is defining a situation as a problem? Who are they claiming to represent, or speak on behalf of, if anyone? What are their interests? How is the problem defined? How is their argument presented and structured? How are they attracting attention and representing the issue? How is the problem being typified? How do others respond to these claims? Importantly, in the context of localism and The Big Society, this is about understanding how issues are constructed within the local arena and perhaps how they compete with or complement other claims. We believe that Design has strong potential to help answer these questions, not least because of designers' skills in deploying artifacts to become sites of dialogue and contestation, something that we take up in the next section of this essay.

Design Thinking, as we have already argued, claims to solve problems. Suggesting an approach that is more concerned with claims, counter claims and the activities of claims makers might lead one to conclude that it is of little or no practical value. However we want to argue that the constructionist perspective is valuable. First, in surfacing the operation of the claims-making it provides would-be claims makers with a potential map of "what works" for future campaigns. Second it surfaces the complex assortment of motives, values and positions that underpin claims-making activities and therefore social problems. Third, success or failure, in relation to the vast majority of social problems

cannot be measured simply – not least because so often the nature of the problem (if indeed it is a problem) is contested. The radical constructionist route however is tuned to operate at the level of meaning; changing old meanings and creating new ones and thereby influencing the workings of power.

# Designing social problems

We have claimed that proponents of Design Thinking and the Big Society can learn something from the social sciences about how Design professionals and others are involved in shaping issues that (some claim) need to be solved. We want to invite designers to make this more clearly part of their practice. We think there are things about Design that make it particularly good at doing this, although the positioning of design-as-problem-solving tends to have ignored them. For sure within commercial practice there are designers who, as standard, write a “return brief” which challenges and iterates a client’s (mis)understanding of a particular issue expressed in a brief, or who talk about the fuzzy front end of any new design project. They already understand the importance of problem definition, even if not how social problems differ from other kinds of problems. We think there are five things that make Design particularly good at helping construct social problems.

The first thing Design does well is rendering issues as something that other people can experience. The short-hand often used for communicating this – “making things visual and tangible” – gives part of the story but misses out how giving people an experience has an affective and tacit dimension that helps them understand what it might be like to be involved in a particular social world. For example creating a series of photos based on an ethnographically-inspired study into someone’s day-to-day life, and then sharing them with others as part of a design project, can vividly bring to life different aspects of an issue. The point here is not so much that the photographs are visual but rather that they embody knowledge that cannot be easily articulated. It touches you; it makes you feel something. It may change you and the conversations you might have.

The second thing Design expertise does well is creating artefacts around which people can gather to interpret and discuss the characteristics of a social issue. Designers tend to focus on their names for these artefacts – sketches, models and prototypes, for example. However it matters less what an artefact is but what it **does**: how it mobilises and is mobilised by people who are concerned with a social problem such as potential claims makers. Design academic Armand Hatchuel calls these “learning devices” whereas management writer Michael Schrage calls them “business experiments”.<sup>31</sup> The point is not so much what the model or prototype proposes (although articulating ideas is important) but rather how a group of people involved a process around a social problem makes sense of and uses these ideas.<sup>32</sup> As the creators of such learning devices, designers play a key role in mediating between the concerns of various stakeholders and claims-makers in a project. What is important here is the opening up of a dialogue around interpretation that then begs the question about whose values matter in determining the nature of an issue.

A third thing that is central to design expertise is staging an open-ended enquiry that actively avoids being closed down quickly in the form of a particular solution. The idea that a design process is an enquiry draws on philosopher John Dewey. The point is that the end result is unknown and unknowable. Even if a service is the likely outcome of a project, the

form and meaning of that service are undefineable at the outset. During such an enquiry designers seem to be particularly good at having an emerging understanding of the nature of their work, probably through a combination of cognitive styles and the practices and culture of their professional field. Design theorist Nigel Cross has written about the double-edged nature of this.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, designers can get solution-fixation, focusing on one aspect of a solution in ways that exclude other, possibly better resolutions. But Nigel Cross, Donald Schön and other researchers have described how during a Design process, understanding of a problem and solution co-evolve as participants frame and reframe their understandings. A Design-based approach stands in contrast to a view of solving social problems as a decision-making process, in which a problem can be fully described and then solved in a linear way. The messy, iterative process that designers know how to organise and work effectively within is closer to how complex and complicated social realities take shape and change than the planning mode of decision-making.<sup>34</sup>

A fourth aspect of Design is its role in making trouble and being open to the potentially disruptive side of creativity. We do not take the view that only designers or people who have been to art-school are creative. But the art-school background of many designers is nonetheless a resource for thinking about social problems because of the practices that are still cherished and indeed championed in such institutions such as playfulness, irreverence and the culture of novelty. Nowadays, as we know, in contemporary art, almost anything goes. Although for some people the results of this might be negative – art that doesn't look like enough like art because it resembles everyday life too much, it does serve those concerned with social problems.<sup>35</sup> Those who have been educated or otherwise caught up within a culture where imagination is highly valued can possibly come up with important new challenges that provide new ways of looking at a situation.

A final part of contemporary Design expertise is opening up the conventions about who and what can be included in a design project. As they make their project descriptions, models and prototypes, designers are involved in creating representations of the contexts in which an issue takes shape. By including artefacts and people into these representations that are not immediately obvious to others, or facilitating others to do so, designers can play an important role in constructing the nature of a social problem.<sup>36</sup> Design theorist Pelle Ehn has written about the value of this. He argues that Design creates a space for not just dialogue and collaboration but also contestation.<sup>37</sup> By including all sorts of people and artefacts into a video scenario, for example, designers can bring into view previously unnoticed aspects of a problem, making differences visible rather than smoothing them away.

Whether this should be called “Design Thinking” or something else is not really what matters here. But we do want to draw attention to the professional knowledge, skills and experience of people who think of themselves as designers and work in particular ways, that is created and built upon within professional and educational institutions, including studio-based education. It is not just as an individual creative activity but a distinctly **collective** process in which people, knowledge, methods and tools, and particular ways of doing things are involved. As with other professional expertise, some of this can be picked up in a half-day workshop or by reading a book, but much of it cannot. We do not claim that all designers, or indeed all Design professions, are equally good at doing the things we identify, but we do think it is important to identify a space that Design professionals can contribute to.

# What this means for Design

The bubble around Design Thinking has largely focused on design as problem-solving and trying to make things better for individual users ignoring the social, political and cultural dimensions of collective life. Design professionals remain largely blinkered about the ways they participate in bringing some problems into view while ignoring others. In the case of Design Thinking, methods and tools developed by professional designers over the past two decades mean that research can be situated and local, grounded in close and careful observation – but how often do designers ask themselves why they find themselves working on some problems – whilst not on others?

Similarly, the Big Society presents a vision of local people deciding what matters to them, locally, and taking local action, but to what extent are these people able to reflect on why are some personal troubles considered to be public issues, and therefore worthy of intervention? To what extent are existing local government structures and modes of participation and consultation adequate to the vision of the shift from central to local empowerment?

We have three specific suggestions about how Design needs to change in order to responsibly rise to the challenges of working on social problems that are often deep-seated and involve conflicting values. For Design to be up to the job of working in these arenas, it needs to do several new things. We believe they are also relevant to anyone involved in working on a collective level trying to address shared issues, such as those working in response to the Big Society or within social innovation and entrepreneurship, whether or not they are designers.

Firstly, individuals need to be aware what they bring to problem-definition and problem-solving on a project level, and how this amplifies, reproduces or challenges existing ideas about collective problems. Within Design there is still not much teaching of professional ethics which has allowed designers, in contrast to some other professions, to remain unaware of, ignore, or tidy away, some of the questions that we think should be asked. Tony Fry's book [Design as Politics](#)<sup>38</sup> has recently made this point forcefully, arguing that working towards sustainability starts with designers gaining an historical understanding of what has shaped one's practice and oneself as a designer. Designers should be willing to examine themselves as agents in a change process and uncover their own values, motivations and commitments and begin to see how this shapes how they frame and reframe issues. The focus on using empathy as an approach to doing design – trying to imagine yourself as the user – has masked the ways that designers necessarily design their values into a project. Projects which seek their inspiration and legitimacy through participatory co-design also involve the active construction and representation of particular ways of creating difference and consensus, choosing particular problems to work on, but excluding others. We think designers should acknowledge this rather than naively thinking that designing "with" rather than designing "for" people makes their designing more "social".

Secondly, designers working on social problems should set up the possibilities for double-loop learning and reflective conversations. These concepts which were introduced by Donald Schön and Chris Argyris<sup>39</sup> to support organisations going through change can also be made use of within communities or groups. It's time to jettison the idea that a design process is a neutral space for a collaborative, consensual design activity. Contestation and difference are important parts of the process of design in any arena, but especially in public or community contexts. We do not claim that personal frames or organisational metaphors can be avoided. Rather as Schön and Argyris suggest, these should be made explicit to uncover the theories that are operative in a project which we believe is more democratic than just espousing an ideal of participation. If a future is to be envisioned, then what any of us bring from the past and the present into it, in terms of ways of understanding and acting in the world, must be brought into view to understand what a proposed future might mean.

Thirdly, designers need to question whether the consultancy model, which continues to be a dominant way that the industry operates, is the right one for working in domains such as public service. This model became an established way for designers to practice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it can prevent designers having a stake in the public outcomes of their work. At the end of a project they move on, often not seeing the results of their work in action, let alone being able to see, consider or be affected by the implications years later. Project H<sup>40</sup> in the US provides an interesting example of a group of people doing this differently, by using a design-based approach trying to stimulate change by working as a non-profit in communities in which its members live. For either consultants or entrepreneurs, a professional code of engagement for those working on public or social issues, whether invited to by a client or doing it themselves, will help give form to the boundaries of where designers' work ends and what can reasonably be expected of it.

# Conclusion

The narrative around Design Thinking has done a great deal to bring Design to global attention as a way to tackle complex, messy issues to which there is no right answer. Designers have sought and found opportunities to work on a wide range of social problems, an amplification of the concerns of earlier generations. We have argued that at least as important as problem-solving, however, is how designers take part in constructing problems: how Design shapes what counts as a problem to be addressed. We borrowed ideas from sociology that highlighted specific ways that problems or issues come into being through claimmaking and then argued that Design is well-placed to be involved in making issues public. But we urged caution too, arguing that in order for designers as individuals, and Design as a professional practice, to be engaged in such work, three issues need to be addressed. This rebalancing of Design towards constructing social problems, not just problem-solving in response to personal troubles, presents huge opportunities for designers.

# Endnotes

1. IDEO's Human-Centred Design Toolkit was funded by International Development Enterprise through a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. <http://www.ideo.com/work/human-centered-design-toolkit/>
2. The Danish government set up MindLab to innovate public services from within. <http://www.mind-lab.dk/en>. Its director Christian Bason's book *Leading Public Sector Innovation: Co-creating for a Better Society* was published in 2010.
3. Work by London design consultancy ThinkPublic within a NHS cancer service was written up in Bate & Robert (2007), who called this approach "experience-based design". Bate, P. & Robert, G. (2007). *Bringing User Experience to Healthcare Improvement: The Concepts, Methods and Practices of Experience based Design*. Oxford: Radcliffe.
4. Derek Miller and Lisa Rudnick of UNIDIR have been exploring the role of design in policy-making within security and disarmament. See [http://www.unidir.org/bdd/fiche-activite.php?ref\\_activite=535](http://www.unidir.org/bdd/fiche-activite.php?ref_activite=535).
5. See [http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/CGSC/events/sams/ArtofDesign\\_v2.pdf](http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/CGSC/events/sams/ArtofDesign_v2.pdf)
6. For example Professor Patrick Dunleavy of the LSE and Sir Michael Bichard both made this case at an event at the Design Council in January 2011, part of a seminar series organized by the LSE Public Policy Group. [http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/LSEPublicPolicy/PPG\\_Seminars.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/LSEPublicPolicy/PPG_Seminars.htm)
7. Although there has been heated discussion about what the implications are of importing (Western) design-based approaches into such contexts, there has been little critical discussion of co-design and participatory design within mainstream Design. See the questions raised by Nussbaum, B. (2010). *Is humanitarian design the new imperialism?* Fast Company blog. <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1661859/is-humanitarian-design-the-new-imperialism>
8. Something that the Design Council, a government-funded body, is now arguing. See <http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-work/Insight/Public-services-revolution-or-evolution/Big-Society/>
9. Although Rittel and Webber's "wicked problems" concept has some similarities with our argument, we draw additionally on literature in sociology to make explicit how social problems are constructed. See Rittel, H. and M. Webber. (1973). 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning.' *Policy Sciences*, 4: 155-169.

**10.** A popular misunderstanding of social constructionism is to say that it means that everything is as important as everything else and nothing really matters because there is no essential truth. This is not what we are saying. Rather, sociology has shown that how various aspects of contemporary life come to be, from identity to values, is as a result of processes and interactions between many social actors. We would say that these actors are both structured by and are involved in structuring our social worlds.

**11.** Nussbaum, B. 2011. Design Thinking is a Failed Experiment: So What's Next?. Fast Company blog. Available online <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1663558/beyond-design-thinking>, accessed April 13, 2011.

**12.** References include Rowe, Peter. (1998). Design Thinking. Cambridge: MIT Press; Cross, N. (1982). 'Designerly Ways of Knowing', Design Studies, 3: 221-227; Buchanan, R. (1992). 'Wicked Problems in Design Thinking', Design Issues, 8: 5-21; Dorst K. & Roozenburg N. (eds) (1992). Research in Design Thinking. Delft University Press, Delft. See also Kimbell, L. (forthcoming). 'Rethinking Design Thinking'. Design and Culture.

**13.** Brown, T. (2009). Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation. HarperCollins, Publishers. Martin R. (2009). The Design of Business: Why Design Thinking is the Next Competitive Advantage. Harvard Business Press, Cambridge MA.

**14.** Design London was set up in 2007 with funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England and NESTA.

**15.** Interestingly, the professional engineering design firm Arup has also begun to emphasize its design credentials through publishing an annual design yearbook. [http://www.arup.com/Homepage\\_DesignYearbook2010.aspx](http://www.arup.com/Homepage_DesignYearbook2010.aspx)

**16.** Bate and Robert. (2007). op cit.

**17.** Brown, T. and Wyatt, J. (2010). 'Design Thinking and Social Innovation.' Stanford Social Innovation Review. [http://www.ideo.com/images/uploads/thoughts/2010\\_SSIR\\_DesignThinking.pdf](http://www.ideo.com/images/uploads/thoughts/2010_SSIR_DesignThinking.pdf)

**18.** 'Building the Big Society', accessed 15 February 2011. [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/building-big-society\\_0.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/building-big-society_0.pdf)

**19.** Cliff Prior chairing a conference on Building the Big Society, 30 November 2010, London.

**20.** Although there have been more recent public statements on the Big Society, we focus on this one since it specifically addresses the kinds of social problems it is supposed to tackle.

**21.** [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/04/David\\_Cameron\\_Lets\\_mend\\_our\\_broken\\_society.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/04/David_Cameron_Lets_mend_our_broken_society.aspx)

**22.** Brown and Wyatt. (2010). op cit.

23. Brown and Wyatt. (2010). op cit.
24. Mills, C. Wright. (1959). *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
25. Ibid Pp 9
26. Melucci, A. (1996). *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Pp 178-9.
27. <http://www.ukuncut.org.uk/>
28. Sherry, J. (2006). *The Cackle of Communities and the Muteness of Markets*. Proceedings from EPIC Conference.
29. See for example Best, J. (1995) *Images of Issues: Typifying Contemporary Social Problems*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
30. Spector, M. and Kitsuse, J. (1977) *Constructing Social Problems*. Menlo Park, CA: Cummings. p 75
31. Hatchuel, A. (2001). 'Towards Design Theory and Expandable Rationality: The Unfinished Programme of Herbert Simon.' *Journal of Management and Governance*, 5 (3-4): 260-273, and Schrage, M. (2010). *Getting Beyond Ideas: The Future of Rapid Innovation*. Wiley.
32. Critical Design as practiced by Dunne and Raby is an example of Design being used specifically to spark controversies. However the idea of 'design for debate' in the form of exhibitions seen mostly by Design audiences, is perhaps a limited view of the kinds of sites that such debates might take place and what effects they might have.
33. Cross, N. (2006). *Designerly Ways of Knowing*. Berlin: Springer.
34. See Winograd, T. and Flores, F. (1986) *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
35. Philosopher Jacques Rancière's description of the aesthetic regime reminds us of the value of disruption to established ways of doing and knowing, challenging conventions about what can be represented and how. See Rancière, J. (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Translated with an introduction by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum.
36. How artefacts can spark an issue into becoming a public matter of concern has been the subject of several studies by sociologists of science and technology. See for example Marres, N. (2005). 'Issues spark a public into being: A key but often forgotten point of the Lippmann-Dewey debate.' In Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.). *Making Things Public*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

- 37.** Ehn, P. (2008). Participation in Design Things. PDC '08 Proceedings of the Tenth Anniversary Conference on Participatory Design. See also DiSalvo, C. (2010) Design, democracy and agonistic pluralism. Published online at Design, Philosophy, and Politics. <http://designphilosophypolitics.informatics.indiana.edu/?p=123>
- 38.** Fry, T. (2010). Design as Politics. Oxford: Berg.
- 39.** Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1978). Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley. Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1978). Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- 40.** <http://projecthdesign.org/>

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# About Taylor Haig

## Our Vision

Our vision is a new model for public service that changes the relationships between citizens, services and the organisations that deliver them. This model places citizens at its centre and creates new value flows in relation to them.

## Our Belief

We believe that for a new model for public service to emerge, there needs to be radical change in how citizens and organisations behave and engage.

## Our Approach

We adopt a design-led, place-based inquiry combined with better use of information and technology to support communities and organisations in their creation of platforms for fundamentally improved public service.

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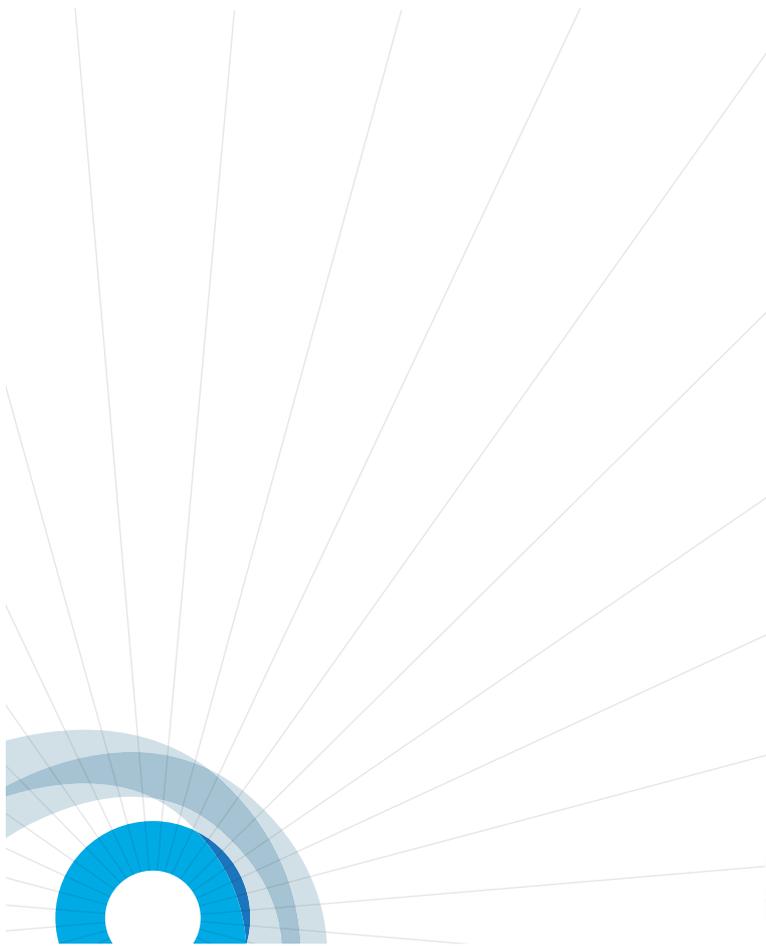
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