

SPECIAL ARTICLE

Moving forward together

Rosan Chow

rosan.chow@oth-regensburg.de

OTH Regensburg, Pruefeninger Strasse 4, 93049, Regensburg, Germany

Design Research in general exhibits the characteristics of a *Fragmented Adhocracy*, a construct introduced by the management scholar Robert Whitley to describe the social and intellectual make-up of an academic discipline. As a *Fragmented Adhocracy*, Design Research has many schools concerning the nature and goals of the discipline. There is no overarching theory that is widely used and instead a variety of theories from other disciplines are borrowed to conduct research. I believe this assessment applies also to the efforts to reorient Design. The editors have named some of them among the countless projects done from around the world. Despite the good intention and exciting development, due to a lack of more systematic, general, exact background knowledge, it is difficult to determine whether a project contributes to new knowledge. In a *Fragmented Adhocracy*, more pluralism leads to stagnation, rather than progress.

To examine *autonomía* is therefore important as it might indeed be a useful framework to organize research. But as Escobar mentions in *Response: Design for/by [and from] the 'global South'*, there are other proposals as well:

In the design world, these include two high-profile reframings: the evolving 'Transition Design' framework that is being developed as a graduate training and research program at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Design; and Ezio Manzini's (2015) conceptualization of design for social innovation and transition to a new civilization (Escobar, 2017, p. 4).

I will add Wolfgang Jonas' Transformation Design to the list. It is perhaps less high-profile but certainly no less ambitious or grounded. There are at least four different frameworks directed toward similar goals. How do we judge them and on what basis do we make the judgement? Like all social experiments, we won't know to which outcome these perspectives lead until they are put to empirical test. It seems to me, for the purpose of this special issue, our focus is on their robustness as a conceptual tool and its fitness for the goal aimed. This commentary thus offers some suggestions to approach examining these frameworks. It is meant to pay homage to the admirable ambitions exhibited in them and to help bring them forward together.

First of all, I would like to suggest treating all these proposals as *technology*: as tools made to perform certain

functions. On this basis, we might apply theories of design to approach assessing these frameworks. Particularly we might draw on Richard Buchanan reference to "wicked problem" and Herbert Simon's notion of design as interface.

Buchanan in the article "Wicked Problem in Design Thinking" (1992) revitalizes the concept "wicked problem" from Rittel and Weber (1973) and clarifies why design problem is "wicked". His idea is that the subject matter or problem of design is indeterminate (no definitive conditions or limits) in contrast to undetermined (a definite problem not yet determined). Except for the most trivial, every design project has at its beginning only a *quasi-subject matter*. Design problem is not given but framed (made specific and concrete) by the inquirer. As such, on the one hand, the problem statement circumscribes the solution and on the other hand and perhaps more importantly, knowledge of possible solutions influences the formulation of the problem.

Chiara Del Gaudio commented on "In a *Fragmented Adhocracy*, more pluralism leads to stagnation, rather than progress":

I wonder if stagnation is either due to excessive pluralism or to inability and unwillingness to actually discuss our different point of views in a dialectic way. It seems to me that design scholars are more concerned with building their own fortress and gaining followers, than to actually subject their approaches and efforts to reorient design to discussion. That is why in our minds, the CfP was not to state the rightness of an *autonomía* perspective in design, but to discuss it.

Ann Light responded:

I agree that there are pressures away from consensus (I talk about colonisation, naming and the neoliberal patriarchal university in my own piece) and I think there is something about the way designers think - to resolve situations to improve them rather than address theoretical commonalities - that pervades design research too.

Chiara Del Gaudio responded:

Yeah...we (as designers) want to solve stuff. :) We did not actually get the "staying with the trouble" advice :) Moreover, what you wrote about design research [elsewhere] raises the issue of the kind of research that is actually considered for publication (I am referring to the work of ordinary researchers, not well known ones) and that is demanded to us by the current corporate academic system.

Devising a framework for the reorientation of Design can be taken as a wicked problem. The authors, factored by their personal situations, biographies, Weltanschauung, social-cultural and historical conditions; draw on the resources available to them to develop their (normative) frameworks. Implicit in their theories, is their personal views on the situation and their knowledge base. They use different literature sources, develop different concepts, have different emphasis and styles. What should we do with such an inevitable diversity or fragmentation? I can think of two complementary ways we can go from here: one scholarly and the other designerly.

The scholarly way is to evaluate the substance and subject them to comparison. It is to find out the major premises of these proposals and examine the link between premises and conclusions, and/or question the premises and their underlying assumptions, etc. At the end, there should be a clear(er) picture of the differences, similarities, strength and weaknesses among the theories. I must sadly admit that Design Research in general is rather weak at this scholarly examination. Many a researcher are eager to make proposals, and quite careful in developing their arguments, but are less interested in comparing their own proposals with others.

There is a fundamental and typical problem haunting many design research efforts as reported in research papers. This kind of paper has often the same structure:

- (1) The author has an interest in the issue 'Y'.
- (2) The author thinks that 'X' will address the issue 'Y'.
The author synthesizes some thoughtful and useful works in relation to 'X' in order to.
- (3) Finally proposes 'X' as a solution for addressing 'Y'.

As one might notice, this structure resembles the structure of common design problem solving:

- (1) There is an issue to be addressed.
- (2) Ideas, resources and know how are brought together in order to.
- (3) Propose a solution.

In most practices of design inquiry, there is seldom an in-depth and careful evaluation, examination, critique of existing solutions. (In commercial design practice, there might be more rigorous examination of products and services from competitors). The focus is rather to propose a solution. This is a stark contrast to scientific and scholarly research in which literature review on the state-of-art understanding of the topic is conducted; and inadequacies and knowledge gap identified. And from there new questions are raised, solutions are made. Without taking these steps to build on one another's work, in design practice as in design research, same mistakes are repeated, the wheel reinvented, synthesis hardly possible and no genuine progress or change made.

The suggestions that I would like to make first and foremost is: If we are serious about establishing 'autonomía' as a guiding concept for the reorientation of design practice, then we need to compare and contrast it with other guiding concepts available at the present and in the past. More works need to be done in differentiating and consolidating ideas, methods and research. Furthermore, organizationally, an international research network should

be built to promote study and exchange among researchers. Thereby a culture of collective instead of individual inquiry can be slowly established. This then will counter some of the difficulties associated with a *Fragmented Ad-hocracy* and the inherent "wicked" nature of design theorizing and research.

In addition to the scholarly approach to examination, there is the designerly way. While the scholarly way is a collective quality assurance and is good at synthesis or consolidation, the designerly way is practical and aimed at realization. They are complimentary.

Here Herbert Simon's simple yet elegant description of design is helpful. There are only three essential aspects in design, namely goal, outer system and inner system. Design is the adaptation of the inner system to the outer system to achieve goal. When we examine the different frameworks in a designerly way, the unit of analysis is framework-goal-outer system. The main designerly question to ask about these frameworks is whether they fit the context.

Theoretically, the outer system is what the inner system is not. It is everything else. Since it is impossible to take into account everything, decisions must be made to identify the most relevant aspects in the outer system. The User-Centered-Design practitioners will suggest the users and the use context. The Practice-Theory practitioners will add the socio-cultural practice in which the user and use context exist.

I assume the intended readers/users of these theories are designers, design educators and design researchers. On the face of it, to understand let alone to employ these various frameworks require different or additional knowledge base not commonly provided by Bachelor or even

Andrea Botero commented on "To examine *autonomía* is therefore important as it might indeed be a useful framework to organize research":

Do you think the proposition is made to organize research? This was interesting observation as I do not see it like that :) I mean that is one option. For me however it reads more as a way to articulate a political commitment... therefore not an all-encompassing framework that should relate to ALL possible paths that exist.

Ann Light answered:

I thought that Escobar was promoting our license not to organise across regions and domains! But then I see a lot of anarchy-syndicalism in what he embraces.

Andrea Botero commented on "On this basis, we might apply theories of design":

Would this not go contrary to the argument that the plurality proposes... that there are other ways to design? And that not all of them start with problems? Anyway I acknowledge the value in trying to compare things and define to be able to talk... still this proposition feels to me a bit complicated. :)

Ann Light commented on "The suggestions [...] methods and research":

I didn't see *autonomía* as a rallying call for a joined-up design research and personally feel a little nervous of the idea, not least as it seems antithetical to the intention and also might curb the creativity inherent in reinventing the challenges through the eyes of the researcher. I tend to look to feminist scholars for inspiration and there the argument is for situated thinking, not orthodoxies.

Masters design education. To be blunt, my guess is that not only the majority of common design graduates but also some design educators and design researchers might not be able to deal with these theories without further acquisition of new knowledge.

Perhaps the usefulness of applying User-Centered-Design principles shows its limitations here. These theories are not made to meet the needs and wants of the designers, design educators, or design researchers. They are made to reeducate/reorient them. As far as I can see, the challenges in reeducation and reorientation are quite high. Not only new intellectual capacities must be acquired, but also the socio-economic environments in which the designers/educators work must be (re)established. Furthermore, it depends on the willingness of the recipients to take on the challenges.

In my opinion, if the conceptual frameworks are to be influential beyond a small circle of researchers and designers, the 'interface' between theories and designers must be devised. Educational institutions and particularly design researchers play an essential role in rendering the theories understandable and learnable for common designers. There is a great need for new and good textbooks. These textbooks might be survey-like, introducing the different theories and their associated research methods and examples. Besides, serious courses for continuing education are also needed to go far beyond the offer of 'Design Thinking Workshops'.

Secondly, even the most interested and willing designers still need to eat. Unless there are alternative ways to design practice beyond the existing ones, our theoretical efforts will have very limited influences on practice. The present situation seems to be a bit better due to the worldwide introduction of doctoral studies and research. The alternative way to practice is research (I am referring to Practice-Led Research, Research through Design and other research-cum-practice activities). Funding by government and other agencies allow exploration of these theories. However, to speed up the

change, additional channels should be established to enable more designers to take part. Not everybody can or would like to spending years acquiring a doctoral degree for the reorientation. In relation to this, some sort of infrastructure must be built to provide incentives and to generate interests. Here I reach the depth of my knowledge and imagination: I have no specific idea except to put my commentary in the forum for discussion.

References

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Submitted on April 20, 2018

Accepted on June 25, 2018

Barbara Szaniecki commented on the overall paper:

Another good contribution in the sense of seeking to give more robustness to several emerging theories in the field of design: i.e. Transition Design, Design for Social Innovation, Autonomous Design and Transformation Design. Certainly, we can add others. Robustness can be understood as complementary between the scholarly way and the designerly way.

At the end of the reflections, perhaps the biggest concern is that our theoretical efforts, with long doctorates, have little influence in practice. In fact, the academic world and the professional world are often very distant. I believe that this Forum is important for this type of exchange of experiences: in Brazil, an effort by the university in the sense of "extension", that is, of the development of actions aimed at society has been demanded. This is a path that, in my view, deserves investment. In times of crisis, lack of public and private investment, what alternative policies and autonomy can we stimulate in the university?