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Global Design Activism Survey

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Introduction

Design activism is enacted through a range of discourses, practices, and institutions around the globe. As such, it has been a formidable influence on the way design is imagined and practiced in worldwide localities, shaping whole design cultures. Still, activist ideas and tendencies have not been uniform in their distribution or their impact. To map the global influence of activism on design cultures, we asked ten designers, design scholars, and historians from different localities all around the world to comment upon the following questions:

- How has design activism impacted the design culture of your country/region/city?
- What do you regard as the key challenges for design activism in your country/region/city?

The range of localities represented here is meant to be neither exhaustive nor representative of the rich variety of localities around the globe where design activism is practiced in an equally varied manner. Rather, they provide personal

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snapshots of existing practices of, and challenges for, design activism in diverse contexts.

The responses attest that design activism has deeply influenced the way design cultures originated and developed in response to social and economic change. In some contexts, activist tendencies have been at work for decades, even centuries, having shaped design from its very emergence. In other contexts where a consumption orientation has been either generally or intermittently predominant, design activism has been influential in reviving, or starting, grassroots activist tendencies within design practice.

It is evident, however, that there are also numerous obstacles and pitfalls before contemporary design activism. The responses show that one major issue regards the way design activism has been appropriated by institutionalized discourse and practices. While on the one hand this provides opportunities, such as more visibility and a better reach to larger publics, it also has its shortcomings. As design activism is reduced to exhibition material or subsumed under approaches that maintain rather than challenge the status quo, it risks being held back from reaching its higher aspirations to bring meaningful change. Another concern lies in achieving appropriate forms of design activism to locality. While design activism is visibly a global movement, it is also responsive to local issues and challenges. A "copycat" approach to design activist methods may make it banal or ephemeral. Many of our commentators have indicated that a deeper engagement with the public, as well as other stakeholders, is a requirement for design activism if it is to avoid these pitfalls.

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"Indian design needs to become self-reflexive … in diverse contexts beyond its connection with the nation-state and markets."

The key feature of "activism" is dissent, the questioning of existing institutions and systems and the norms and values that sustain them. Dissent has a powerful presence in contemporary India, and design thinking and imagination have been used in generating and communicating alternative ways of being and living in this world. An early, little-explored example is Gandhi's use of design methods. There are other instances: in the women's movement in India, the environment movement, and the struggles for civil and political rights. Equally, the use of design methods in successfully promoting fascist ideology or unsustainable and exploitative lifestyles as a counter-narrative to the Gandhian human-rights worldview is also plain to see in today's India.

Thus, while "design thinking" and "design imagination" have been used by activists of all shades and ideologies, within the professional practice of design these have never really translated into activism. The modern history of design in India reveals that it has basically

been deployed in the service of the nation-state and market and so has been ontologically incapable of being activist in a dissenting way. In such a context, design education has produced the kind of professional practice where potential activism is domesticated into "social" design, ironically gaining respectability only when it serves government agendas or can be "scaled-up" and made "marketable."

Yet, even within this scenario, there is one instance of the kind of activism discussed here, which emerged from the very first Indian institute for modern design education and lay in that institution's revolutionary conception of teaching and learning. The National Institute of Design at Ahmedabad experimented in non-hierarchical, non-linear pedagogies and non-competitive evaluation systems focused on individual learning and attempted a synthesis between theory and practice within a broad humanistic curriculum. There was a deliberate and courageous decision to stay outside existing modes of higher education, paying the price of being denied recognition by the country's university system to this day.

Indian design needs to become self-reflexive, thereby gaining greater understanding of its own epistemology in diverse contexts beyond its connection with the nation-state and markets. Only then can the emergence of this kind of activism be better understood, paving the way for its greater presence in the professional practice of design.

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"It is important to learn from the rich history of popular movements about what works and what does not, to explore a range of tactics and theories of change, and to develop a critical analysis of power, not just gadget-making."

One measure of design culture is its institutions, and the last decade has seen an increasing embrace of design activism by design institutions in the USA.

Two flagship museums of design, the Museum of Modern Art and Cooper-Hewitt, have mounted major exhibitions devoted to design in the public interest. At the same time, the AIGA, a national professional association of graphic designers, has incorporated design for social change into its mission. Art schools and universities have begun offering advanced degree programs in public-interest design. Mainstream publishers have produced on- and offline magazines, books, and events that have inspired and popularized design activism to eager readers. And at the Architecture Biennale in Venice this year, the USA will be represented by pop-up urban interventions.

This kind of institutional embrace of design for the public good was hard to imagine ten years ago, and it did not just happen on its own – these changes are a response to individuals, agencies, and NGOs taking action and agitating for design with a conscience.

One downside of the mainstream embrace of design activism is that it gravitates toward institutionalized frames of reference: the language of entrepreneurship, humanitarian aid, and "innovation." This excludes more oppositional or explicitly political approaches that may rattle existing power structures.

Otherwise, key challenges for design activism are the same as for activism, generally: sustainability and perseverance, effectiveness, agility, and outreach. Designers celebrate invention, but it is important to learn from the rich history of popular movements about what works and what does not, to explore a range of tactics and theories of change, and to develop a critical analysis of power, not just gadget-making, charity, or public awareness.

Particularly, designers should participate in broader conversations about public policy, community engagement, and social mobilization. For instance, the Center for Urban Pedagogy partners graphic artists with grassroots community groups in New York City to visualize pressing social issues and the public policies behind them, from affordable housing to the juvenile justice system. Architecture 2030 is successfully urging city and state governments across the USA to implement stricter green building standards. Designers are even engaged with Occupy Wall Street and affiliated groups producing posters and publications to mobilize around inequality, debt, and the right to the city (Figure 1).



Figure 1
Occupy Wall Street poster by Josh MacPhee, 2011. Source: Josh MacPhee.

Lina Kang – Seoul, Korea

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"Design activism has opened up new possibilities of design as a transformative process to improve the city."

The idea and practice of design activism has nurtured – or perhaps more precisely, instigated – the fundamental establishment of the design culture of Seoul. While design had been mostly understood and used as a means of aesthetic styling since the former mayor Oh Se-hoon initiated the "Design Seoul" policy between 2006 and 2011, the current mayor Park Won-soon has been extending the meaning and boundary of design, in order to engage with social and political issues. Calling himself a "social designer," he and his workforce have been implementing design activism in policies – some of the interesting cases include installing floor-heating systems for the homeless and setting up an up-cycling process by funding and educating people (Figure 2). Simultaneously, the KIDP (Korean Institute of Design Promotion) has been increasingly adopting and training service design approaches in the realm of the public sector. In other words, design activism has opened up new possibilities of design as a transformative process to improve the city, with its capacity for problem-setting, participatory process, and the emphasis on human-focused values.



Figure 2
Three posters put up at a subway station. "The City of Seoul's Social Economy Idea Competition" (second from left); public donation poster (third from left); "Hope Ondol" (traditional Korean floor-heater) campaign poster to help the less privileged (fourth from left). All endorsed by the City of Seoul. Photograph by Lina Kang.

In applying the true meaning of design activism to policy, Seoul has been foremost among the cities in Korea, due to its status as the political, economic, and cultural capital, with a quarter of the country's population of 50 million based there. However, considering that the social expenditure of Korea has been one of the lowest among the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) member countries, it is no surprise that the policy-makers are not fully convinced of the raison d'être of design activism. Often, together with the welfare scheme, it has been framed as a political issue by the Conservative Party and media, which affects public perception as well – not only within Seoul, but also nationally. It might be required to inform and circulate the concept and capability of design activism to both public officials and the wider public, since it is merely shared among a rather small group of young progressives at the moment.

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"Design and activism merge ingenuously in Istanbul at a subtle and low-key level but with greater impact in our visual culture."

Turkey is a non-Western modernity where tradition, modernity, and postmodernity overlap. Because design professions serve in all of the three layers, design knowledge can appear in unexpected contexts. Design knowledge (particularly product design) is not confined to industrial production but is also accommodated as a part of cultural production, embracing pre-industrial and industrial skills at once. Therefore, there is relatively more room for activism, in comparison to more advanced countries.

Firstly, design activism mobilized design knowledge to introduce the products and practices of marginalized communities, such as women, crafts practitioners, and pieceworkers, to the contemporary cultural scene in Turkey. While uncovering and empowering these communities' unique practices, design professions are deconstructed and reconstructed in alternative practice areas other than industry (Figure 3). Designers either initiate or are involved in projects by NGOs, design collectives, and local governments – for instance, to develop new handcraft products and packaging for agricultural produce with local communities for global markets. This professional working format is a recent phenomenon in Turkey.

Secondly, in the last five years, outstanding art venues started to welcome critical design investigations. In "Rabbithole" (2009), MentalKlinik posed complex questions about contemporary interiors by using designed artifacts. In "DNA_nen" (2012), Nazlı Eda Noyan sought to create a "gene map" based on the everyday imagery of the country's institutions. The First Istanbul Design Biennale (2012), curated by Emre Arolat and Joseph Grima, stands out due to the number of projects on open-source product design, participatory



Figure 3
Doily News. Doilies/coasters made from newspapers, by Ela Cindoruk, 2007. Photograph by Ela Cindoruk.

design, and contemporary interpretations of traditional forms of production with digital technology.

Lastly, pre-industrial production skills and post-industrial urbanism coexist in Istanbul. That is why hands-on knowledge passes on to various forms of expression via design in contemporary cultural production, giving both processes and objects a critical edge regarding modernity. These products are produced in batches or editions, unlike mass production. They contain a blend of traditional and modern materials and techniques. More importantly, they are differentiated from generic products by having a narrative. Besides manifestations in art venues, that is how design and activism merge ingenuously in Istanbul at a subtle and low-key level but with greater impact in our visual culture.

Looking at the entire country, design expertise is increasingly demanded by NGOs who work on gender issues, grassroots development of disadvantaged areas, and migrant communities in urban contexts. With the EU framework programs, the number of grants – hence job opportunities – for design graduates in grassroots development projects are going to increase rapidly in the near future. Are students going to be trained foreseeing this demand? That needs work. The main challenge for design activism in Turkey will be introducing its concepts to design students as an integral part of their future practice.

Zeina Maasri – Beirut, Lebanon

"Design activism … has enabled an alternative framework of the practice to emerge locally."

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Design culture is still relatively nascent in Beirut, and that can be said of other cities in the Arab world. Local product and fashion designers number just a handful, and no serious academic training and scholarship in these areas can be noted. The growth of the graphic design profession over the last two decades has been largely tied to a thriving advertising industry. This, together with a rampant neoliberal economy, contributed to a circumscribed understanding of the design practice as a tool in the service of consumer capitalism. The significance of design activism to the emerging design culture of the region lies mainly in its potential to question and counter the dominant market-driven definition of design. It thus has enabled an alternative framework of the practice to emerge locally – one that is motivated by critical inquiry and meaningful exchanges in the public sphere.

In countries where civic rights are largely undermined, design activism, such as that witnessed in the recent Arab uprisings, inspires agency in designers. The Arabic pamphlet "How to Revolt Intelligently," which was circulated during the Egyptian protests in January 2011, is one fascinating example (Figures 4 and 5). Unlike the pretty maps designed to guide tourists around the protected heritage sites of Egypt and away from its contemporary somber reality, this 26-page, roughly illustrated guide provides basic tactics for Egyptian demonstrators.



Figures 4 and 5
Two pages from the 26-page pamphlet, "How to Revolt Intelligently: Important Information and Tactics," Cairo, 2011. Source: anonymous.

Just as the uprisings in Tunis and Cairo provoked other Arab cities to follow suit, the activist fervor among artists and designers surpassed national localities. One could, for instance, see the same graphic stencil, which spelled "revolt" in beautiful Arabic calligraphy, spread from the streets of Cairo and multiply on walls in Beirut. Such graphics were widely shared via electronic social networks and designers' blogs. The blog by Ganzeer, a young Cairene designer largely credited for the protest tactics pamphlets, is perhaps the most visited. On the Syrian front, the blog of the recently formed collective "alshaab assoury 'aref tariqo" (Syrian people know their way) has put a compelling collection of solidarity posters designed by the group online, to be freely downloaded.

The increased interest in design activism globally in the last couple of years may bring positive changes to the field in general. However, just as with the flow of cultural forms, trends, and lifestyles within an increasingly globalized economy, there is the question of how transnational forms of activism in design may maintain the very premise of their quest: that is, to bring meaningful change to the communities they intend to serve. In other words, the key challenge for design activists in places like Beirut, and other cities in the region, is to respond to the locality of the context in which they intervene, without uncritically succumbing to a prescribed set of discourses, tactics, tools, and styles.

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"The most central challenge for design activism today is to resist being enrolled to promote the so-called creative economy and not to lose sight of its original ideas and raison d´être."

Design activism has had a huge impact on design culture in Denmark – both as a counter-culture movement and more recently as a close ally to society. Over thirty years ago, design activism played a central role in shaping various counter-cultures around the country. Perhaps the most famous one, Christiania, was founded in Copenhagen in 1971. Since then, many architects, designers, and urbanists have flocked there to study how simple DIY practices could be used to rethink housing typologies, product design, food culture, music performances – even to propose an alternative model for a new society.

While the inhabitants of Christiania, Ungdomshuset, and other design activist bastions have been in ongoing conflicts with the government and local authorities, a new role has recently been assigned for design activism in our country. This change was marked in 2007 with the local authorities in Copenhagen clearing and demolishing Ungdomshuset. One year later, Realdania, a major Danish association funding new architectural initiatives, sponsored "Get Lost" and "Instant Urbanism," two exhibition projects where design activists were invited to make a series of interventions in Copenhagen,

including guerrilla gardening, play, citizen participation, and community building. More recently, in March 2012, Godsbanen, an old freight yard in the heart of Aarhus, was transformed into a site for cultural production in a variety of forms: theater, dance, film, poetry performances, and open public workshops. Design activist thinking is making itself felt in every corner of this area, since in its organization Godsbanen relies to a large extent on citizen participation and bottom-up initiatives from artists, designers, and architects. With the rise of the post-industrial city, municipalities and city councils all over the country are faced with the challenge of rethinking the use of urban environments. And design activists are often invited to take part in this transformation.

Although this new alliance has in many ways proved promising for our cities, it is not without problems for design activism. To me, the most central challenge for design activism today is to resist being enrolled to promote the so-called creative economy and not to lose sight of its original ideas and raison d'être. In the post-industrial era, cultural production has become a competitive factor, and many city councils, entrepreneurs, and urban strategists still seem enthusiastic about Richard Florida's idea that a city's potential for economic growth is tightly coupled with its ability to use a diversity of cultural events in order to attract a new labor force. This is what nowadays goes under the name of the "creative city." With design activism entering a new alliance with the city, it is not uncommon to find activists' projects being presented as part of festivals and exhibitions in urban spaces where they are put on show as if in a museum and the only thing missing is the sign saying, "Do not touch!" But design activism is pretty much about being touched by people – and touching them.

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"A progressive understanding of design … should accommodate local knowledge, such as Ubuntu *– a community-affirming anthropocentric ethos."*

Cape Town, in particular, and South Africa, in general, has inherited a systemic legacy of bad design. The apartheid dispensation that lasted four decades manifested itself in design in a city that is spatially, socially, and morally disconnected. This, in turn, has informed the robust discourse on design in our public fora. The challenges associated with urbanism and the questions of citizenship in cities of the twenty-first century are the focus of concerted design activism by the local design community.

Within the rest of the continent, the debates have been centered around post-colonial identities of nation-states in Africa, as well as the interrogation of the relevance of design for prioritizing civic rights, socioeconomic development, education, health, and provision of

basic services, among other things. This generalization is for the sake of economy (as Africa is a rich and diverse continent of some fifty-four states), but does nonetheless reflect the prevailing trends.

In the South African context, the focus of design activism has been one of redefinition of the public role of design. In the continental setting, the focus has been on the relevance of design to the developmental agenda …

I am optimistic, though, that we are on the right path with respect to Cape Town's designerly aspiration, and that what happens here will inspire and reinvigorate design activism within our region. This optimism is informed firstly by a general acknowledgment that change is imperative, and secondly because there is already progress being made in redressing the challenges highlighted earlier (Figure 6). The fact that, in June 2012, Cape Town was the first city on our continent to appoint a designer at the level of a director within municipal governance is not lost to design observers – this is a massive boost to our collective efforts for design agency in terms of visibility and relevance.

Our biggest challenge is to advance a progressive understanding of design as a discipline that is engaged with, and relevant to, the myriad socioeconomic and geopolitical concerns within our context. Further, such an understanding should accommodate local knowledge, such as *Ubuntu* – a community-affirming anthropocentric ethos in our part of the world.

There are varying degrees of engagement with, and appreciation of, design within the spheres of academia, business, government, and civil society. In South Africa, academia (as producers of design graduates) and business (as employers of professional design services) understand the pivotal role of design to their core agenda. Unfortunately, though, governments (from local, to regional, to national) are not fully cognizant of the potential for (socially conscious) design to contribute effectively toward the advancement



Figure 6
Children playing at the Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) center in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. Source: www.capetown2014.co.za.

of the developmental agenda. Similarly, civil society views design as an elitist profession. The two latter constituencies are the ones with whom design needs to engage in a sustained, inclusive, and participative dialog.

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"The impact of activist design in our design culture is found, above all, in the field of ideas."

It is difficult to determine what the impact of design activism has been on the culture of design in Spain. This is because its design history still lacks complete and deep study. As in other places around the world, design here has been oriented toward the marketplace, and activist design is still a minority activity. This does not mean to say that there has not been a social concern on the part of designers who, in line with a wider tradition in the history of design, believe that they are contributing to the improvement of society.

Leaving aside specific cases, the impact of activist design in our design culture is found, above all, in the field of ideas. In Spain – certainly within the design world – design's cultural role is important. This puts it beyond productive growth and the industrial apparatus. This is undoubtedly an inheritance that comes from the radical designers and architects who, between the late 1950s – that is to say, the deep era of the Francoist dictatorship – and the transition to democracy in the late 1970s, managed to make design an element of opposition and a factor in the transformation of everyday life.

Since the "¡Democracia Real YA!" (Real Democracy Now!) protests of May 15, 2011, one of the most habitual slogans in the movement has been "They don't represent us," which responds to the feeling among citizens that their basic rights (housing, work, health, education) are clearly being sacrificed on the altar of economic growth. In this respect, through 2012 activists have protested against the banks, police repression, corruption, and evictions and in support of health and education, amongst many causes. For their part, designers have demonstrated their support by collaborating with collectives like Democracia Real Ya or various neighborhood groups and, especially, via platforms like "Voces con Futura" (Voices with a Future) or the Facebook page of "Diseñadores Indignados" (Outraged Designers), which has served as one of the points of contact for reflection and the sharing of and calling to action (Figure 7).

If these activities respond to immediate issues, in the long run, one of the most important challenges is that of building more sustainable approaches to production and consumption. Another is to develop the potential of sharing in and contributing to common goods. But, moreover, in this period of crisis that is hitting Spain, one of the major challenges – especially for graphic design – is that of getting citizens to change their way of thinking in terms of how



Figure 7
"Mi madre sería mejor ministra de economía" (My mother would be a better Economy Minister), 2011. Source: Voces con Futura.

they represent themselves and how they organize their collective life through more direct and active engagement in politics.

Cesar Sierra Bernal – Bogotá, Colombia

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"In order to be able to establish any alternative models, there needs to be something concrete through which one might contribute."

In a country like Colombia, whose economy basically depends on the exportation of primary unprocessed materials, it's still difficult to talk about design activism. Our socioeconomic and cultural conditions make us continue to assume that design is all about appearance and style. We have understood it more as a tool for developing consumption – thus Colombian industry tends to employ "design stars" (such as Karim Rashid working for the Colombian furniture manufacturer MUMA) to design a mere plastic seat.

There have been a few initiatives that are orientated toward "urban actions," such as happenings or flash mobs that attempt to generate citizen consciousness. They have been initiated by foreign groups, such as "Kaos Pilots," whose "100 en 1 dia" project was made in May 2012. Other initiatives come more from academic backgrounds, such as rural design exercises undertaken by students at the Jorge Tadeo Lozano University, Bogotá, within the "Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability Network" (DESIS). But these have been short-term projects, and their results remain inconclusive.

Given the problems of everyday life, and above all, their lack of opportunities, some designers, such as "Nosotros Reutilizamos con Imaginación" (We Reuse with Imagination), have tended to work more with recycled materials and low-technology processes (Figure 8). However, I doubt that these can be judged to represent a conscious gesture in the face of a wider system. They function more through a necessity for survival than as a form of resistance or any conceptual manifesto.

In order to be able to establish any alternative models, there needs to be something concrete through which one might contribute. Design in Colombia tends sometimes to theorize, rather than bring itself to have an influence on the productive systems that are mostly governed by multinational companies. This makes the insertion of basic models of a different approach to product development difficult.



Figure 8
Nosotros Reutilizamos con Imaginación (We Reuse with Imagination) – project with the OlaveFrorido family in the Jerasalen neighborhood of Bogotá. See http://nosotrosreutilizamos.wix.com/conimaginacion. Source: Natalia Rodriquez, Bogotá.

It is difficult having to export coffee or cacao so that Nestlé sends it back processed at a price five times more than the primary material. Stimulating citizen engagement in public issues and educating the public in responsible consumption and the use of resources would be a big step – but this will perhaps only come when the general violence and corruption that so afflicts us ends. The road is long, but maybe the seed has been planted.

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"Grassroots activities reveal not only economic problems, but also a certain individualism and a lack of trust of authorities as institutions responsible for solving living-condition problems."

In Poland, design activism has always been connected to *samizdat* publishing practiced when freedom of speech was limited (e.g. partitions in the nineteenth century, the Second World War, communism). Enriched with romantic national mythology and merged with traditional Catholic symbols, it has created a huge variety of visual idioms that are used, reused, reinterpreted, and travestied up to the present. The popularity of multi-layered symbols instead of slogans is an echo not only of Catholic iconography, but also of a necessity to encrypt subversive messages under a political regime. Symbols of battle and resistance, created during the Second World War or under communism, are employed today by feminists, the outraged, sexual minorities, and even football hooligans and right-wing publishers. They appear on book covers, posters, stencils, and elsewhere (Figure 9).



Figure 9
Football supporters' stencils in Warsaw using symbols from the Second World War (Warsaw Uprising and "Fighting Poland") and with the neighborhood name written in black letters, referring to the nationalistic attitude of the group. Photograph by Agata Szydłowska.

Design activism in Poland has also been linked to DIY practices as ways of providing oneself with goods and services unavailable due to economic shortages. Many thoughtful, yet shabby, objects produced by local bricoleurs can still be found in Poland. These grassroots activities reveal not only economic problems, but also a certain individualism and a lack of trust of authorities as institutions responsible for solving living-condition problems.

Design activism in Poland, still practiced in a partisan or grassroots way, is a reflection of a strong individualism and a need for expression. Therefore, in my opinion, the key challenge for design activism in this country is cooperation within the frameworks of groups, communities, even institutions. That is, replacing the "romantic" spirit with a "positivist" ethos. Guerrilla gardening, clothes exchanges, or doing-things-slow are examples of positive and modest design-related cooperations, which in Poland are still a matter of following the trends but hopefully will develop into everyday practices.