Design culture as critical practice

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Since around 2000, the term «design culture» has come under increased usage in scholarly circles and in more everyday commentary. It may be typified to denote something that is beyond design as a value that is attached to singularized objects or a professional activity. Rather, the term suggests agglomerations of interconnected things, people, institutions and interests, as well as material and immaterial infrastructures that connect them. Studying these interconnections – between production (in all its facets, from making to marketing to mediating), consumption (including the social practices of everyday life, not just shopping, owning and using) and design – is where Design Culture studies (henceforward upper case D and C) has become a specific disciplinary, academic field of enquiry.

The growth of «design culture» (lower case) as a more general concept has much to do with particular economic arrangements of late capitalism. In everyday commentary it stabilizes and renders particular understandings of design in late capitalism «reasonable», making them widely acceptable and understandable. Design culture then can become a promotional tool for sets of values and practices. Equally, in university teaching it can become instrumentalized as a form of business knowledge, or consumer empathy.

Is it possible to take design culture beyond these orthodoxies and nurture it as a form of critical practice? Can the depth of understanding that comes through enquiry in design culture be employed in lasting ways to change the conditions of its own formation? What would a reflexive design culture look like and how might it help to equip new social and economic formations in the face of multiple crises of the Anthropocene? What is design culture as a critical practice?

The rise of design culture

«You must come to see us in *x*. We'd love you to experience our design culture» is an invitation I've been given more than once. This is different from «Come and see what we make» or «I live in a beautiful city». In the former there is an attempt to suggest that there is a way of life that revolves around and through design, be this in a design studio or a neighbourhood. It suggests certain dispositions and qualities that are shared across people and are enacted and shown through particular constellations of artefacts, events and institutions. In urban contexts, these may include showrooms, galleries, bars and restaurants, public spaces and iconic buildings as well as particular productive capabilities such as craft workshops, fashion houses, digital start-ups or small-scale furniture companies. Thus, the emphasis here is on the «fit» between modes of production and consumption within a designerly milieu (Bell/Jayne 2003).

This idea of design culture has become a promotional tool particularly in policy and planning since the 1990s. It is used to boost the creative capital, and therefore value, of an entity. This is evidenced through its material but also in its human assets as an innovative and creative place. The former (its buildings, urban environment and so on) work semiotically to signal the latter (its digital coders, creative entrepreneurs, makers and so on). Getting the «fit» between the resources of consumption and everyday life for such milieux and these activities then became the holy grail for municipal planners and policy gurus (e.g. Wood 1999; Florida 2002).

In such instances, design cultures become objects in themselves. They then invite specific methods of investigation. Their parts may be examined in direct ways – visual or material «reading» may take place. But in addition, with their multiple features and facets, design cultures – at whatever scale – require extended and often ethnographically embedded kinds of investigation. They are things to be inhabited, to move within, following the connections and flows through them so that their existence is not just understood as the sum of their individual parts but also the result of the relationships that exist between them. The researcher thus becomes the curious traveller, engaged in multi-linear micro-journeys across their ecosystems. The conditions of design cultures demand particular epistemological and methodological sensibilities, and therefore open onto the possibility of design culture as a field of study itself.

This is where design culture as an academic discipline has grown since around 2000. Stemming partly from design history, it nonetheless has a declared concern for contemporary design and society. Masters' and bachelors' programmes in Design Culture or Design Cultures were established at the University of Southern Denmark (2006) and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (2010), followed soon after by the London College of Communication. Other programmes have come and gone, for example at Leeds Metropolitan University and Manchester Metropolitan University. The first Design Culture conference, held in Kolding, Denmark in 2014, brought together about 60 academics from around the world, demonstrating this new discipline's geographical reach and, at least, a nascent community of like-minded scholars. Despite such initiatives, Design Culture (I capitalize these words to denote it as an academic field rather than an object of study) has not established any core orthodoxies in its methods, politics or theories (Julier et al. 2019). The programmes mentioned above are quite different in their declared aims, pedagogic styles and points of reference.

Perhaps this lack of consistency or absence of orthodoxies is deliberate. It is on my part. After I published the first edition of my book *The Culture of Design* in 2000, I was frequently asked if I would

go on to put together a «Design Culture Reader» or set up an academic journal to sail under that flag. However, aside from being shy of the time pressures that such tasks involve, I was also cautious of claiming any territory where I might mansplain what the field needs and how to do it. Instead, I was keen that Design Culture was open and flexible, to be developed as an accessible project that would be free of any epistemological or ideological oppression within it (Julier 2006).

However, by not declaring a core set of positions or points of reference, Design Culture runs the risk of drifting into other territories or being subject to appropriations from outside it. It is noteworthy that some of the Design Culture courses that are mentioned above have combined with management studies, for example. The inference here might be that the study of the culture of contemporary design will make you a better businessperson or more commercially malleable. This may not be the intention of their proponents. It is probably more a case of needing to address challenges of graduate employability. Such questions require closer examination than space permits here, however.

Meanwhile, a broader historiography of Design Culture may result in a more reflexive understanding and nuanced idea of where study and research in it may lead to. As a disciplinary term, Design Culture originates from around 2000, as already noted. Its methodological and epistemological roots may, though, be traced back to the development of cultural studies and design history, particularly in the UK in the late 1970s, alongside a socio-material turn in anthropology. Little acknowledged and even less explored are the contributions of material culture studies, early science and technology studies and the new economic sociology in the mid-1980s. Collectively, these point to a deepening of interest in the relationality of social and material processes and objects that is the starting point of Design Culture studies.

These antecedents also emerged in a historically charged moment. The late 1970s and 1980s were when, in the Global North, the great shift from manufacturing-dominated to service-led economies took place; or, in other words, the move from Fordist to post-Fordist structures was accelerated (Hall 1988; Harvey 1989). This coincides with increased deregulation of financial and trading systems that has led to globalization, the distancing of manufacture from design and the speeding up of systems of provision, otherwise known as the New Economy. In short, the rise of design and the rise, then, of design culture, have coincided with massive restructurings of global and local economic orders. Beyond notions of everyday life becoming more aestheticized and more design-intensive (Featherstone 1991), the rise of design culture may be understood as the result of particular economic and ideological processes that have coursed through the world.

These processes are sometimes called neoliberalism or neoliberalization: on-going processes of marketization, competitivity and flexible accumulation (Julier 2017). Design culture involves the materialization of systems of coordination between production and consumption in both concentrated and distributed ways: creative quarters or corporate design centres in cities as a spectacular bringing together of design resources on the one hand and global manufacture, distribution and information networks for fast fashion or smartphone brands on the other, for example.

Design Culture studies can therefore be interpreted as the outcome of specific historical processes. It is a truism that design – as a self-consciously declared value – has become more ubiquitous than ever before during the last 30 years and that this in itself is reason for the rise of a notion of design culture and its study. Knowing a bit more about how this truism has come about and why other related fields have emerged may help in adding a measure of reflexivity into Design Culture studies. And in so doing, we may become aware of how it plays into certain economic arrangements or may detach itself and help to produce other ones.

Design culture as practice

Design culture is the result of certain historical processes. But it is also operating in these. In picking up on this – design culture as active in the shaping of futures – Kjetil Fallan observes that «the term is probably even more interesting as a dynamic, a course of action – something that we do, produce or conjure, rather than something we observe» (Fallan 2019: 16). In this, Fallan is moving beyond design culture as an object to think about bridging from academic enquiry to some form of practical action. Design Culture as an academic field, or even design culture as a possible profession, then becomes a more reflexive, intentional way of intervening into real-life contexts.

By pushing Design Culture as a form of critical practice, we are making new demands of it. Fallan's argument is daring as it is productive: it pushes us to enquire as to what Design Culture might (also be) for. Here he takes the notion of «design culturing», drawing on Fry's (2009) term «design futuring». This views the future not just as something that is latently «out there«; the future is «configured» through the present rather than something that comes preformed and inevitable.

This idea of an eternal present keys in with the open-ended, unfinished and emergent qualities of design cultures. Design cultures, as we have seen, are made up of multiple, connected and dynamic actors. Their complexity and relationality mean that they are rarely stable. Nor are their objects or social practices (Knorr Cetina 2001).

Cultural planning that promotes an idea of design culture as underpinning localities may wish to present a view of coherence and stability. But even these identities are based on some notion of dynamic change. After all, the concept of cultural capital is founded in the ability to distinguish what is new or emergent and is therefore worthwhile in confirming certain social positions (Bourdieu 1984). Researching how the networks and meanings in design cultures change, what new socialities, objects and ontologies these open onto and how they feed back into everyday routines and dispositions will also involve participating in those dynamics.

A broad view of design culture as practice accepts that all study, research, writing, presenting, organizing and other pursuits that come within its purview are forms of practice. Design today exists in an expanded field of activities beyond straightforward «form-giving». This is evidenced in the proliferation of its specialisms, taking in, these days, strategic, organizational, interaction, service, activist and social design, for example. In these, outputs are not always strictly material, spatial or visual. Instead, their processes overlap with other fields such as management, policymaking or community building that allow for less material outcomes such as relationships, concepts or visions. Equally, the notion of «diffuse design» (Manzini 2015) shows the possibility that design is frequently carried out by non-specialist, non-professional designers. It follows, therefore, that as doing design culture brings its exponents into a range of relationships and interactions that have agency elsewhere, so they are doing design.

In this context of relationality, the researcher-practitioner may arrive at different outcomes depending on distinct disciplinary approaches. One way to understand how these vary might be in thinking about different forms of disciplinarity – multi-, inter- and cross-disciplinarity – that exist within Design Culture. Multidisciplinarity involves bringing several distinct disciplines together to focus on a particular object from the point of view of each specialism. In our case, we may see design culture through the lenses of human geography, media and communications, sociology, economics, management, philosophy, design history and so on. A design culture is an object of study, understood from a variety of perspectives. If these viewpoints are aggregated and synthesized then there is an interdisciplinarity going on. The disciplinary contributions that are brought to the object of analysis are maintained. Design Culture may involve pairings with fields to produce, for example, feminist studies of design cultures. In so doing, the objects under scrutiny change. Design Culture can become more kaleidoscopic here, with the available perspectives becoming multiple and more complex. From here, if we are to pursue this metaphor, the experience of the object of study, study of it,

produces new ways of understanding, knowing and feeling. This is where a trans-disciplinary approach comes into play. It may then be disruptive of the integrity of separate disciplines when practised, and even disruptive of itself (Barry et al. 2008).

To recapitulate, these three kinds of disciplinarity echo the notion of design culture as an object, as a discipline and as a practice. A design culture as a singular, yet complex, object with its specific materialities and socialities that can be studied from various viewpoints suggests a multidisciplinary approach. A design culture as something that has contingency and relationality with other cultural assemblages points to the synthesizing processes that are enacted in interdisciplinarity. A cross-disciplinarity in Design Culture studies engages new ontologies and epistemologies; it involves transcendence and disruption of everyday worlds.

Pursuing design culture as a practice in each of these (sub-) frameworks suggests different intentions and outcomes. In the first instance, the multidisciplinary one, taking multiple perspectives on design culture objects through the lens of cognate disciplines such as psychology, human geography or economics, allows for deeper and more rounded understandings of its processes and effects, possibly resulting in better designers. This might also help equip others to make more informed choices in their policymaking, planning or other pursuits. A specialized form of consultancy may take place here. The object of design culture remains unchanged. In the second, that is in terms of interdisciplinarity, more nuanced forms of analysis can exist within design so that, for example, we might find design economists who are good at calculating, understanding and communicating the potential economic impacts of design. Or we might find specialists in health design who understand medical practices while knowing how design is or might be deployed across its various human and material systems. This might be taken to involve a reversal of the «T-shaped designer» (Leonard 1995; Brown 2009). The argument here is that designers are trained to be specialists in particular material fields – spatial, graphic, industrial design and so on. This depth is the vertical axis on the T. They are then able to deploy these across a range of contexts – the horizontal axis. However, design culture as kind of practice may involve specializing in deep knowledge of a context, be it, for instance, healthcare, urban housing, ageing and so on alongside a wider and more varied understanding of how different design specialisms structure these and their experience. Thus, beyond design management, which tends to focus mostly on optimizing the needs of private firms, the design culture practitioner may develop impactful and productive specialisms. Here, then, the axes of the T are swapped. It also goes beyond Baratta's (2017) T-reversal that focuses on generic

design *skills* in the vertical axis to foreground specific design *contexts* on this axis instead. Through this reversal, new objects of design culture may be formed in this interdisciplinary approach and new sub-disciplines of design practice and education may emerge.

A trans- or interdisciplinary form of design culture as practice might lead to something that is, at this stage, unknowable. However, the starting point of such a journey would, as with the multi- and inter-disciplinary versions, still require some foundational knowledge in design culture to be established (suggesting that I should have edited that «Design Culture Reader» after all!). It may involve a more clearly expressed futurity in that it would involve speculating, experimenting and showing other realities. Nonetheless, this would be grounded in empirical understandings of the conditions that give rise to them and be reflexive in the role of the practitioner in shaping them (see Table 12.1).

A range of disciplinary possibilities and subject positions are therefore available to the pracwtitioner of design culture. To date, it appears that they are mostly yet to be experimented with and developed. They require intensive readjustments in the bureaucracies of both the academy and other professions. They may also force different conceptions and articulations of value in design (Kimbell / Julier 2019). They remain relatively malleable in their potential ideologies and motivations, as at home in hardnosed commercial settings as more explicitly socially or politically engaged pursuits. So, how might design culture as practice work in more critical ways? The next section extends the discussion into three further ways by which design culture as practice might be employed to explore alternative futures while using the deep knowledge and understandings of complex environments and systems that it also generates.

Design culture as critical practice

The rise of design culture and Design Culture has not been the only growth industry of the past two decades. As already mentioned, other new subdisciplines of design have emerged. Shared among many of these – and, of course, a defining feature of design culture – has been a tendency to focus on wider strategies and relationships between multiple actors. By and large, these have emerged through commercial practices as either designers themselves seek to rise up the value chain – offering more complex and far-reaching services – or clients have centred design more explicitly into the production and mediation mix, thereby requiring a greater range of design occurrences in their strategies.

Nonetheless, the economic crisis of 2007–8 has reopened the landscape to produce renewed impetus in design activism and social

DESIGN CULTURE MODE	DESIGN CULTURE PRACTICE	INDICATIVE OR SPECULATIVE PRACTICAL OUTCOMES
Disciplinary	Multifarious contexts in which expertise is enacted – both academic and public	Convening public discussions, exhibition curation, writing articles for academic and popular media
Multidisciplinary	Expert insights brought to contexts through the lenses of cognate disciplines	Consultancy advice in city-branding using theoretical perspectives of urban studies
Interdisciplinary	Combination of disciplinary approaches to produce finely tuned expertise	Consultancy work in the design commissioning of healthcare provision
Trans-disciplinary	Transcendence of disciplinary norms and disruptive creation of new forms and articulations of expertise	Modelling of everyday, socio-material routines and their experience in post-disaster alternative futures

Table 12.1 Summary of potential modes and practices of Design Culture.

design and to draw in new approaches that seek to address the societal and environmental challenges (Bieling 2019). At the same time, critical design and associated variants – design fiction and speculative design – have found increasing prominence in design schools, discourses and curation. It seems to be no coincidence that a similar coexistence of societally embedded and more artistically orientated critical design practices emerged during the economic crisis of the early 1970s. By this, I refer, for instance, to the «Design for Need», alternative technology and the community design movements on the

one hand and anti-design and radical design on the other. Again, economic crisis gives rise to radical reconsiderations of design's purposes.

The historical details of the backgrounds to these different periods of economic crisis are different, but this still suggests a connection. The connection is to be found more in the economic transitions within and out of these crises that were and are taking place. The early 1970s saw the abandonment of the Bretton Woods agreement that paved the way to increased deregulation of global trade and finance, leading to the take-off of neoliberalism in the 1980s, as already mentioned. Since 2008, the neoliberal order has come under increased scrutiny and critique while at the same time, it seems, it has further entrenched itself. Here, design inhabits the possibility that all bets are off. Anything is possible. And maybe, just maybe, design can actually play a role in shaping more humane, equal and ecological futures (Boehnert 2018).

This might be done in one of three interrelated ways. All three, I think, belong more closely to a cross-disciplinary conception of Design Culture: they each entail possibilities of disrupting academic and professional norms and of producing new ways of thinking, acting and being. However, we might not entirely assign this to the riskiness and, potentially, fact-free realm of imaginative leaps. It is possible that the more tested, known and grounded practices of multi- and interdisciplinarity in Design Culture may come into play.

The first way is in developing a kind of speculative Design Culture that can open up the imagination to new possibilities as to what its objects might be. This moves beyond speculative design that, I would argue, has been subjected to constant re-hashes of Dunne and Raby's pioneering work (Dunne / Raby 2013), now over a decade old. While being important in widening the vocabulary and foci of debate in design, there is a danger, as Tonkinwise (2014) has observed, of its refined gallery orientation losing contact with the empiricism of the everyday world. Thus, I advocate here a reality check in this speculation. In the first instance this would be achieved by enacting it *in public* – a kind of everyday experimentalism rather than sequestering it away in the more exclusive world of galleries or arty publications.

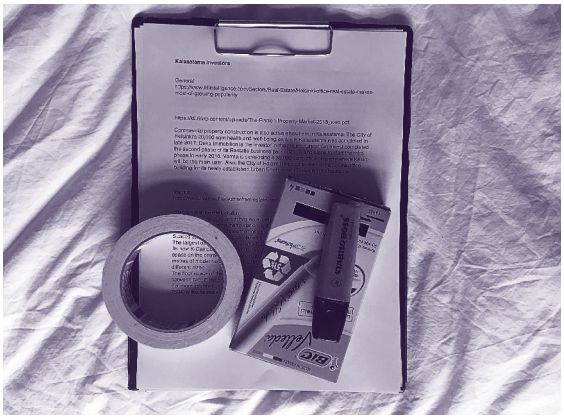
A practice of speculative design culture may have drawbacks. First, there is the very real chance of harm being inflicted as experiments and speculative actions are undertaken among the lives of people. When these go wrong, it may be more than a few test tubes that get damaged (Krohn / Weyer 1994). Second, everyday experimentalism may be employed as a way of obfuscating poor decision-making, delegating responsibility to the experimental space and, potentially, the experimentees. Third, it runs the risk of being taken as flights of whimsy and an endless succession of «what ifs?» without reference to

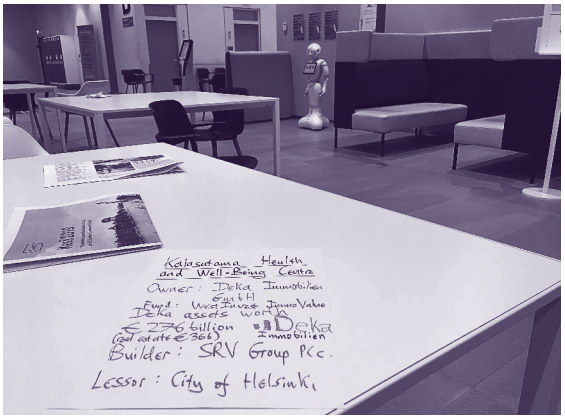
scholarship and research in the social, economic, technological and political realities that shape futures.

A tempered approach is therefore recommended. A critical practice of design culture may not necessarily involve producing new objects. Instead, it might focus more on understandings of existing objects. These might draw attention to and even open up critical perspectives onto their functions. These are then rendered readable in new ways, potentially disrupting their machinations and semiotics while also rendering them more reflexive. This remains a speculative endeavour as the outcomes of such interventions are unknown. To give an example: in the summer of 2019 I spent, as part of a wider project, an hour labelling buildings in a district of Helsinki that was under construction. The labels carried information about their leaseholders, construction companies, investors and the amounts of investment. This was an attempt to add little-known material about the financial ecology of the area and how this shapes its material culture. In so doing, I was making public the economic processes that produce these and was thus rendering the buildings themselves differently (Julier 2019).

A second approach in critical design culture practice may work further downstream. This is where existing proposals for new ecological, economic and/or social arrangements that are made by others – by, for example, political groups, community organizations, policymakers, academic research centres – are used as a starting point. The design culture practitioner would then explore their socio-material implications. What kind of world would these result in? How would such a proposal provoke new relationships and forms of exchange, objects, localities and everyday lives? In doing this, the practitioner is involved in a form of modelling or prototyping where ideas are materialized and tested. It is where design culture moves into prefigurative politics, acting as a knowing and reflexive testing ground to demonstrate and explore the viability of alternative futures. Again, this goes beyond the more intimate outcome contexts of speculative design. It looks more widely at how new circuits of culture might be produced and made viable.

The role of the design culture prototype is important here. Prototypes carry futurity as «things-that-are-not-quite-objects-yet» (Corsin Jiménez 2013: 383). Their open-endedness and unfinished qualities allow for iterative development rather than prescribed futures. The artefactual, object orientation of the prototype also aligns with the materiality of the political (Marres/Lezaun 2011). It is social and technical, engaging an on-going set of adjustments between people and devices. While it may involve the very routine, even humdrum, acts of adjusting, observing, measuring and articulating, it also holds the





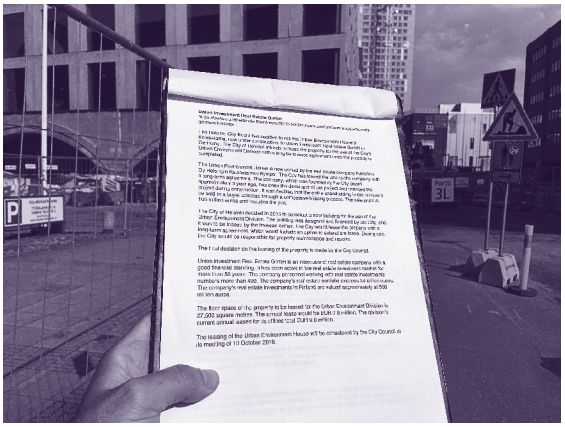


Fig 12.1 Images from «Performance 2: finance labelling» of «60 Minutes in Smart Kalasatama: six experimental performances within an experiment» (Julier 2019).

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461044-013 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

potential to open the imagination to new possibilities for living and acting in the world.

This iterative prototyping would also have the potential to actually feed back into the shaping of novel political positions and processes. It therefore overlaps into a third approach for design culture as a critical practice that would bring the practitioner into active formation, with others, of new frameworks. A speculative example may help to clarify here.

There is no shortage of economists who make the point that the core threat of neoliberalism to social equality and justice, the environment and, indeed, economic stability is in the dominance of financialization (e.g. Piketty 2014; Mazzucato 2018). The dominance of fiat money and the continuous drive to maximize return on investment has, they argue, distorted global economic practices away from their social purposes. In response, a group of social scientists and policymakers have pushed for a new economic structure called the «Foundational Economy» (Foundational Economy Collective 2018). Their thinking separates the finance-dominated sector from the entrepreneurial and routine sectors. The latter is taken to involve goods and services that are necessary for basic functioning in everyday life such as food, healthcare, energy or transport. This, in their view, is the foundational economy. Their proposal is that this foundational economy be protected and its status enhanced through the social licensing by governments of firms that are engaged in these areas. This would include, for instance, commitments to training, accessibility and environmental impacts. This very simple starting point has profound implications for systems such as food production and distribution, or energy generation and supply. There would be undoubted effects outside this foundational economy as entrepreneurial activities become more concentrated into non-mundane areas of everyday life.

A practice of design culture might have a role in helping to define what both foundational and non-foundational sectors are and how they might operate. The concept of the Foundational Economy was developed mostly within a centre for research for socio-cultural change in the UK. It has subsequently been explored in real life through a «challenge fund» in Wales, where, in 2019, invitations were made by the regional government for experimental projects that tested the concept in real life.[1] One wonders how it might have been different, or presented differently, if the Foundational Economy concept had been formed in collaboration with a range of other specialists including those in design culture. Would this have allowed for deeper prototyping and shaping prior to rolling it out into experimental platforms? Potential for exploring the real material implications may add more lustre and

nuance to it while also allowing for more robust expectations in terms of how it might be implemented.

Such an approach calls for greater embeddedness of design culture into political envisioning in ways that go beyond current systemic orthodoxies. It could engage a cross-disciplinary attitude in design culture and elsewhere, resulting in the disruption of methods, bureaucracies and outcomes of disciplines to produce new ways of knowing, understanding and saying. This is where a critical practice of design culture may be the most ambitious, but also the most impactful.

Conclusion

There is more than design. There is also design culture. This describes not singularized objects as the end-point of linear processes of conception and execution of things. Instead, design culture encompasses open, unfinished assemblages and networks. Through this it also becomes a description of different scalar groupings. This conception has emerged as part of an economic shift in late capitalism. Design Culture studies, as an academic discipline, has emerged alongside this designation and the historical processes that produced them. It draws from many parallel shifts in the humanities and social sciences.

In its scholarly eclecticism, Design Culture always leans towards other disciplines. Its epistemologies and methodologies, to date, have mostly been multidisciplinary, viewing and interpreting design culture objects through the lens of these other disciplines. It also lends some weight, albeit perhaps indirectly and tacitly, to the formation of the interdisciplinary modes of enquiry and practice that are in constant emergence, both within professional design itself and in academia.

By understanding these aspects, we can then move towards exploring the potential that Design Culture can also become a form of critical practice. This is where it steps out of pure analysis and aims at agency in the world. There are a number of ways by which this may be done. First, one may recognize that the everyday activities of those engaged with Design Culture in a disciplinary and reflexive way are also practising design culture. More nuance and, indeed, intention may be produced through more consciously understood frameworks. Therefore, another way may be in using the knowledge and skills generated within Design Culture as a starting point to then creatively generate other design cultures that open the imagination up to potential directions of change. This may involve prototyping and prefiguring new political possibilities – recognizing that these also imply new objects of design culture and then exploring what these could be.

1 https://businesswales.gov.wales/foundational-economy.

A third way might be in participating, along with others, in the envisioning of these, working alongside them in the observation and analysis of realities to then construct other, possible ones.

These proposals constitute a heroic view on disciplinary practices. They leave out the very real resistances that hinder much of their potential. University systems of audit and measurement do not necessarily lend themselves to experimenting with new disciplinary possibilities. Equally, pressures to make design students «relevant» and «industry ready» often produce a myopic adherence to an outdated, even destructive conception of design that is doggedly tied into economic growth models.

In the face of the deep social, environmental and ecological crises that late capitalism is producing, another world must be made. This chapter proposes some preliminary ways by which deep understandings of design's contemporary histories, theories and contexts may play into and be engaged within a critical practice in order to achieve that.

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