# Moving Towards: Design as Potentiality and Ethnographies of the Possible

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Despite popular definitions (eg Fiell and Fiell 2013, Simon 1996/1968), Dorst has convincingly shown that the act of problem solving is not the totality of designing, suggesting: 'the co-evolution of problem and solution leads to the uneasy conclusion that in describing design, we cannot presuppose that there is something like a set 'design problem' at any point in the design process.' (2003a). Design involves part-making the landscape one is travelling through (Dorst 2003b). He argues we must understand the practices of designing as an idiosyncratic balance of interpretive behaviours – from identifying and working within existing relations to employing taste, judgment and choice (2003a). While this seems undeniably true at the level of observing what designers do, Dorst's very acknowledgment of the difference in practice between different practitioners points to the innate trouble here with definition. Design is both a range of processes and a grouping of them; it is something performed by professional designers trained in particular methods and by people making change without formal design training. Design is a highly contested activity because it is not one activity.

Yet, the pursuit of making purposeful change by selecting and shaping the materials available that afford (or, indeed, resist) one's purpose is highly visible and of increasing concern. For, even if Dorst can critique Simon's view of design as solving problems, it is hard to dismiss Simon's 'sciences of the artificial' (1996), being the way that the world is shaped (and must be studied) as a product of our activity. Referred to now, in other circles, as the Anthropocene, our age is one in which the legacy of invention has touched everything, and human activity may now be the most powerful determinant of the fate of the planet (Stromberg 2013).

If we look up from mechanics of designerly practice to the way that each of us tries to make our way through life, we can see this planet-shaping at another scale. Design is forever about *what could be* and the act of shaping becomes the story behind the material culture that envelops us, contingent upon what has gone before and reined in by the limits of the current imaginary. Aspirations are not told only in

formal, sanctioned activities. In humble everyday ways, we all work to stack the odds in our favour by tweaking, nobbling, planning and making do. Light and Miskelly (2008) suggest this tactical designing reveals itself in activism, contrasting it, after de Certeau (1984), with the sanctioned, more strategic, design of designers. Whatever our access to and mastery of the tools, design is always future-oriented; always an exploitation of features of the present with future goals in mind.

Given this shaping activity can only happen in the present, what can it tell us of futures? In asking about *ethnographies of the possible*, we can answer by pointing to both the story of the designing, and the outcome of it, as texts embodying the potentiality for other realities and narrating the elimination of potential through the choices made. And we can go further, since some design research is designed reflexively to engage with these very aspects.

Within anthropology, which is mostly concerned with the present (or, thus, immediate past), we see curiosity about the role of the future in work on trends, futurists and 'anticipatory anthropology' (Strzelecka 2013), in discussion of media futures (http://www.media-anthropology.net/file/discussion_media_futures.pdf) and in Boelstorff's thoughtful critique of the furore round Miller's comments on the future of Facebook (Boelstorff 2014)[1]. An industry has grown up round predicting the future from the trends of the present and anthropologists have a role.

Yet, elsewhere, at the cusp of participatory design, STS and anthropology sit more ambiguous works, such as the introductory sections to Ehn et al's book on *Making Futures* (2014), Light and colleague's explorations into how older people might want to shape future life, *Democratising Technology* (Light et al 2009, Light 2011), and a memorable workshop collaboration between Pelle Ehn, Laura Watts (self-styled 'archaeologist of the future') and participants at the Participatory Design Conference 2012, which produced the energetic ezine *Travel Guide to the Futures* (http://issuu.com/medeamalmo/docs/pdc-making-futures-fanzine). Researchers at RMIT have been running events under the umbrella of Design + Ethnography + Futures, interrogating what uncertainty means in practice (see Akama et al 2015). Across all these is recognition that there are politics to futures in the present, and ethics to one's methodology for impacting them, which are rarely articulated in

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[1] Miller, in suggesting that young people have left Facebook, drew on his research experience that belonging was already losing appeal to parts of the population, but attracted media attention for speculating on the social network's future.

mainstream design discourse, so the very emergence of this liminal space is worth registering. It is a space in which researchers not only consider the future and seek to impact it, but also consider the nature of impacting and how future-making is embedded in all making, because every act is an intervention in the status quo and thus alters future potential. As Light (2011) comments, in this kind of design work, a prop used to support people imagining futures is not merely a prompt, but may be a 'design(ed) artefact, helping to reveal the "designed" therefore "designable" nature of tools and systems'. An interest in the ideology of 'the future' as a single discernible state comes through[2]; for instance, it is deliberately challenged by coining the term 'The Not Quite Yet' in *DemTech* (Light et al 2006, 2008) and using *future-making* as a verb (Ehn et al 2012).

Significant, here, is the way that the design discipline takes on both the making of change and the imagining of it. Ehn, Watts and Light are acknowledging the co-constructed journey of Dorst's analysis in playful settings, but with critical intent. The work of imagination is to bring forth meaningful structures and assemblies out of raw world. In imagining difference, something changes in the potential for action and the directions it might take. Thus, it is not only the material choices we make that start to shape the futures possible, though these (infra)structural commitments can be profound, as Bowker and Star describe (1999); we are also working with the fluid material of the mind itself and shaping it. And in considering new ways of being, we are already performing a part of the work of designing, even if we never pursue imagined difference into the discernible world of materials and tools.

It may be that the very thought of mustering tools and materials is what keeps action at speculative stages. Research into taking social action suggests that two circumstances act as trigger to campaigning (EIA 2014): one is the sudden escalation of threat, forcing the issue in a way that resembles problem-solving, whereas the other is the sudden recognition or acquisition of suitable tools and/or materials, which closely resembles a more opportunistic, exploratory designing.

Accounts of this latter process, where an idea lingers until a mechanism for enactment is found, make visible a process of *moving towards*. This inherent movement and directionality in design is not a straightforward intentionality (a

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[2] One secondary finding from the *DemTech* project was that many participants had conceived of 'the future' in their youth and were offering predictions circa 1960, most of which had come to pass by the time of the workshops in 2007.

cognitive position which has been challenged by a generation of situated thinking, eg Suchman 1987), but rather is related to the phenomenological insight that we cannot think without thinking *of* something. This movement precedes any exchange with one's materials, such as those foregrounded in the 'discussions' that culminate in material utterances (Dearden 2006) or in Schön's consideration of the reflective practitioner (1983), which are already about *acting with* something. In considering our relation with time, Heidegger (1962) shows how we anticipate action through projection, even as we approach it. This projection underpins designing, being a *movement* to intervene and one with a purposeful direction *towards* a new state of affairs, though such projection can never be outside its context and is ever subject to the contingencies of the immediate present. It is always what occurs to us to do *at the time, in that situation*. Indeed, if we look at design training, unlike most disciplines, part of preparation for performance is the development of the individual's capacity for creative improvisation with the materials at hand. Light and Miskelly have argued that sometimes those materials are other people (2008) and in this, too, we can see the dynamics of moving towards changed states of being.

In the practices of participatory design, designers are not always performing design directly towards an outcome; they are sometimes designing opportunity for others' participation. Yet, sometimes others' participation is the intended outcome, if we acknowledge the political nature of designing and the need for many voices to have a say. Sometimes this involves an investigation into people's beliefs, values and goals as a pragmatic vehicle for achieving collective ends (see, for instance, Ehn et al 2014, Light and Akama 2014, Light 2011). Designers may act as researchers, looking for means to inspire other people's envisaging. These learnings are neither anthropological in their elicitation, being highly staged; nor in their use, since they are solicited and made to serve the goal of inspiring engagement and imagination.

But if we want to see this work of moving towards new territories of concern more clearly and to understand these transitions in culture better, we could include this site of hands-on learning in our studies. We could allow that a performative engagement with societal challenges using design tools elicits a different kind of knowledge about ourselves from other methods. And we could see the journeying of problem definition/solution of which Dorst speaks as a form of ethnography, at the point where the constraints and possibilities of our materials, tools, imaginaries and desires meet.

## Acknowledgments

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