

# Design Activism: Developing models, modes and methodologies of practice

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The overarching theme of this journal is design activism. Designers need to be activists, and radical shifts are needed to allow any form of activism to evolve. Institutions of higher learning and the profession need to nurture and equip the next generation of designers with new ways of learning and practice; to achieve any form of positive change, design institutions, scholars and practitioners need to urgently change their models, modes and methodologies. Design pedagogy and practice needs to be realigned away from the current asymmetrical approaches to teaching, practice and research. Over the years, I have been nurturing and expanding an overall agenda that consistently works toward developing innovative solutions to benefit civil society and improve social innovation, sustainability and the environment. Design activism informs not only my philosophy as a designer, but my philosophy and practice as a teacher and scholar.

Fieldwork in East Detroit (see IDEA Journal 2013) enabled me as both a design educator and practitioner to see the drawbacks of design and to re-evaluate the constrictions of traditional design practice and pedagogy. This experience led me to incorporate social justice theories, feminist theory and practices, and activism into my academic approach to design. I began to question whether new forms of social change in design could be relevant to design education and specifically interior education.

Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*<sup>1</sup>, about the immigrant experience, inspired me and I realised that literature could serve a model of social change. I began to identify and to model the work

described by Charles Tilley in his book *Social Movements 1768-2004*:<sup>2</sup> public campaigns, coalitions, worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment. These themes are still the driving force behind my design activism agenda.

This led to questions about the methodologies and practices currently used in design, such as: if design is creatively purposive, then what purpose does it serve? Can the rubric of consumption be a two-way street between prosperity and sustainability? What would happen if intentional ethical components were applied to design? Is it possible to design in opposition to the demands of the market? These critical questions about the nature of aesthetics and ethics shaped my practice and continue to drive my design activism teaching and research agendas.

As design educators, students and practitioners I believe we are at a crossroad. One possible path is to continue to mould our identity as educators nurturing the next generation of interior design professionals. The other is to methodically step back and rethink where the profession is headed. This issue of the IDEA Journal focuses on moving beyond design activism as a curiosity, to make a conscious effort to work toward a philosophical and pedagogical stance.

As educators and designers, we have witnessed the sustainability movement flourish from grassroots to a branded sensation. However, more change is still needed. Educators and future practitioners need to know that we can no longer put our environment at risk. We also need concrete and measurable

objectives. Ideally, I am proposing that creating a better future will require a methodology of interdependence that can be disseminated promptly and equally on a global scale within academia and the profession – a mutually shared responsibility.

A small but growing collection of design researchers are working to develop studies to test models, modes and methodologies of design activism. The submissions in this journal identify some notable accomplishments in *activist modality*. Many of these *design activism acts* have been incorporated into pedagogical and practical venues. This issue of IDEA Journal aims to nurture a shift toward design activism within design pedagogy.

The visual essays by Julieanna Preston and Tüüne-Kristin Vaikla, together with the project review by Matter Practice's Sandra Wheeler, situate us within the 'activist space' of an interior. Preston creates an activist interior as a small and polemic matchbox that travels from New Zealand to Los Angeles, while honouring a number of activists named Rosa (e.g., Rosa Parks). Vaikla draws us into an abandoned church in Estonia, sparking emotions by presenting an occupied space where peace and war commingle. The project by Matter Practice literally and physically navigates through storms of collisions to create a peaceful and silent temporary station in one of the busiest intersections in the world: Times Square, NYC. Throughout these essays, the authors as variously feminist, artist, candidate, educator and design practitioner all work to help reveal, document and explain the social nuances of contested interiors.

Davide Fassi, Alessandro Sachero and Giulia Simeone's project from Milan, and Charity Edwards, from Melbourne, created design studios embracing the principles of activism. They took students out of the studio and challenged them to rethink their modes as activist designers. Both sets of students were asked to embrace latent spaces that were about to be demolished or revitalised. Educators and students used various tactics to approach the project, including strategies related to food security (insecurity) and the recent tactics found in the Occupy Movement. As they invested more time they all became active participants – *activists in their own right*.

The research papers by Cathy Smith and Michael Chapman, and Sally Stone, offer recommendations about explicit responsibilities for protecting the built environment. Their joint findings conclude that design activist models, modalities and methodologies *matter* albeit in the UK, Australia, or beyond and that as activists, we must 'save to renew' and 'renew to save' while we try to meet the desires and needs of others (users of the space). In these papers, design activism takes the form of traditional and non-traditional campaigning methods (placards as iconic building fragments), participatory/temporary environments and workshops.

Design activists also need to hear the voices of participants, users, elders and caregivers. By eliminating terms like 'expert' and 'expert knowledge', we can encourage a more inclusive modality of thinking and making. Ideally, a civil society is universally inclusive, with flexible goals that can adapt to change. Individuals all have their own 'blind spots', but together we can implement real change by including everyone and focusing on the ethics of caring. Jennifer Webb and Brent Williams explore the concept of inclusiveness, and Fleur Palmer explores a New Zealand Māori community's vision for the future.

As design educators and practitioners continue to expand on design activism research, we will continue to encounter obstacles. This issue of IDEA Journal is a starting point for exploring the potential of some of the complex interrelationships and strategies between concepts, statements and projects. Design activism literacy is needed within the twenty-first century context, particularly working to meet the needs of individuals undergoing changes in either their environmental and/or economic conditions.

## NOTES

1. Sinclair Upton, *The Jungle* (New York: Bantam Books, first published 1906, this edition 1981).
2. Charles Tilley, *Social Movements 1768-2004* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2004).