

DESIGN ACTIVISM
Developing models, modes and
methodologies of practice

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The Journal of the Interior Design/Interior Architecture Educators Association

Formed in 1996, the purpose of IDEA (Interior Design/Interior Architecture Educators Association) is the advancement of education by encouraging and supporting excellence in interior design/interior architecture education and research within Australasia; and being the regional authority on, and advocate for interior design/interior architecture education and research.

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- to encourage staff and student exchange between programs;
- to provide recognition for excellence in the advancement of interior design/interior architecture education;
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Professor Andrea Mina, one of the founders of IDEA and a key figure in initiating the IDEA Journal, passed away on 26 March 2014. Past and present IDEA directors, members and executive editors would like to pay tribute by acknowledging his extraordinary contribution and commitment to IDEA over the past 20 years.

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IDEA JOURNAL 2014

DESIGN ACTIVISM: Developing models, modes and methodologies of practice

Guest Editor: Dr Lorella Di Cintio

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PROVOCATION

The living conditions of First Nations communities, food-security concerns, access to clean safe water, domestic violence – seemingly disparate subjects can be, and are being, connected to interior design teaching and practice. Such issues are particularly linked to the ongoing discussions of designers working within the new global design paradigm. There is evidence that a range of worthwhile initiatives have been undertaken by design professionals who choose to pursue socially responsible practices, and by educators and practitioners who are intentionally shifting away from a focus on pure aesthetics and market-driven practices.

Dissatisfied with what they perceive as an over-emphasis by the design community on aesthetics, and its failure to meaningfully address the design needs of at-risk and low-income communities, several academics and practitioners have started to incorporate social-justice issues into their design research and teaching – while a number of independent design practitioners are involving themselves in activism.

Design activism is a combined entity of aesthetics and ethics. It is trans-disciplinary, it incorporates mixed media, and it is inspired by the ethics of socio-political activism and community building. Several design activists have partnered with the design profession and specific political agencies to create design solutions that meet the needs of politically, economically, and socially disadvantaged communities, but initiatives are sporadic. In order to make what are now essentially grassroots initiatives a part of the mainstream, models and methodologies for action need to be developed within the design academy. As guest editor, this call is shaped by my desire to make ethics a more central component of interior design practice and pedagogy.

This journal's theme calls for a re-thinking of interior design pedagogy and a review of current practices found in design activism. For instance, the author(s) could consider and highlight noteworthy projects of scholars whose pedagogy and critical work is linked with activism, and/or respond to pedagogical shifts found in the field of design activism, particularly as they emerge in and relate to the discipline of interior design/interior architecture.

The goals of this call are two-fold: to promote debate, discussion and theorization among designers, design academics and various segments of the general public about the place of ethics and activism in design, and to contribute to the development of knowledge that focuses on embedding design activism into the design curriculum and design profession. The overall objective of the call is to encourage a shift towards activism in interior design theory and design education.

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Design Activism: Developing models, modes and methodologies of practice

Lorella Di Cintio : Ryerson University, Canada

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*¹, 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*:² 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).

Rethinking Our Values to Achieve Emancipatory Design

Jennifer Webb and Brent T. Williams : University of Arkansas, United States

ABSTRACT

The need for inclusive environments accommodating the entire range of human functioning, both people with disabilities as well as those who are not presently disabled, has not been achieved despite decades of discussion and a growing list of standards and legislation. Perhaps because disability has always been a part of human existence and has been part of the discourse in environmental design for decades, it is not viewed as emergent and the inclusion of people with disabilities is not seen as a crisis. Nonetheless, people with disabilities represent one of the largest marginalised segments of our population. Inclusion does not subvert the other issues with regard to function or aesthetics but fulfils all criteria necessary to achieve good design.

This paper explores critical aspects of emancipatory research and identifies opportunities for what should rightly be called emancipatory design. The most significant characteristics relevant to developing emancipatory design values include: 1) redistributing power within the social relationships of design; 2) adopting the biopsychosocial model of disability; and 3) facilitating users' reciprocity, gain and empowerment. These fundamental strategies are necessary to ensure a long-term engagement in social justice and achieve good design.

Inclusive design is essentially a value-based process, which takes as its premise the fact that everyone has a right to participate in community life. Consequently, a powerful argument to support the importance of teaching inclusive design is the need to assist students in the development of their own set of values to underpin their future practice as built environment professionals. Inclusive design can fulfil this important function. It is clear that teaching students to administer technical codes or interpret legislation for equal rights is an important part of the preparation of a student for professional practice, but this approach without the philosophical underpinning is unlikely to result in an inclusive environment.¹

INTRODUCTION

Socially responsible design has been practised for at least fifty years.² The burgeoning social justice movement has become the new 'sexy' across all scales of design and all parts of the world. Consequently, service learning and social entrepreneurship foci have become necessary to attract the best students to colleges and universities and no academic discipline is immune from these influences. These issues are particularly evident in design disciplines reflected in academically-based programs such as The Rural Studio, Design Corps, and Archeworks as well as knowledge events such as the Art and Design for Social Justice Symposium and the Public Interest Design Week.³

With growing concerns such as sustainability, natural disaster response, and affordable housing, celebrity advocates have garnered attention for high-profile projects.⁴ Combined with compelling media coverage, the public has begun to understand that they are directly impacted by these issues. In contrast, the need for inclusive environments accommodating the entire range of human functioning, both people with disabilities as well as those who are not presently disabled, has not garnered similar celebrity and media attention. Because disability has always been a part of human existence and has been part of the discourse in environmental design for decades, it is not viewed as emergent and the inclusion of people with disabilities is not seen as a crisis. Nonetheless, people with disabilities represent one of the largest marginalised segments of our population.⁵ Disability is pervasive; it is a part of people's lives regardless of gender, age, race, ethnicity and/or education. If more than 37 million people in the US alone experience a functional difference, is it accurate to describe these variations as 'abnormal'? As Judy Heumann contends, disability is a normal part of human existence and we are all only temporarily abled bodied (TAB)⁶ and functional differences are an integral part of human existence.

While few people, events, research projects, or publications address inclusive design as a fundamental necessity, a notable exception is *Metropolis's* editor-in-chief, Susan Szenasy. In the call for submissions in *Metropolis's* 2012 Next Generation Design

Competition, she defined the current state of affairs regarding universal design more specifically:

Everyone was talking about barrier-free design, universal design, trans-generational design, and accessible design. Clearly, design was to be at the heart of a new movement. But this didn't happen... Small, inadequate fixes to a vast design problem that needs to be addressed by teams of systems thinkers who integrate all our senses (in case we're missing one or more of them) into every space we traverse and inhabit.⁷

In addition to the more than 37 million US citizens with functional differences, returning veterans, ageing baby boomers, and TABs (the rest of us) require an empowering built environment. If designers of the built environment are to engage in critical social discourse and contribute to the resolution of both nascent and persistent social issues, a new educational paradigm must be created. Subsequently, students and practitioners of all design disciplines, as the introductory quote states, must respond with both the reimagined professional values and the skills to create inclusive and enabling environments.

To this end, this paper explores critical aspects of emancipatory research and identifies opportunities for what should rightly be called emancipatory design. A critical examination of the framework's application to interior design education, research, and practice will be explored. In addition to specific applications intended to benefit people with disabilities, the impact of these constructs will be discussed with regard to other marginalised, under-represented groups.

Within the body of this paper, the language used reflects the primary goal of emancipatory research with emphasis on and respect for people, both singular and plural. In its very order, the phrase *people with disabilities* preferences the person before any other defining characteristic and will be used except in quoted materials. This very emphasis on the person renders these concepts and processes equally applicable and important for all individuals and groups who experience marginalisation. In other words, these concepts and practices result in good design for everyone.

BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE DESIGN

Why has the need for inclusive design and research not attained the visibility of other socially driven objectives? Environmental barriers have been discussed by scholars and explored by select practitioners for decades. Handicap design, accessible design and universal design have been included in design curricula and program accreditation standards for many years. Instructional texts, handbooks, and websites are plentiful, yet examples of environmental barriers are numerous even in award-winning designs. It is critical to understand that inclusive design requires that complex social issues be challenged and that the core values of design students and practitioners be transformed to enable all community members to participate equally in their near environments. Social concepts surrounding health and ageing, legislation, building codes, construction costs, and, most importantly, cultural stigmas must be addressed before comprehensive change can be achieved.

Most people are unable to imagine a future with limitations. Loss of ability may happen to others but 'it will not happen to me.' Short-term disabilities resulting from life events such as sport injury or chemotherapy are as difficult to anticipate as long-term disabilities resulting from disease or accident. While most people understand the likelihood their health status and ability will change as they age, research findings show that individuals, regardless of age, still believe design of home and neighbourhood will not impact their ability to live independently.⁹ The inability of most people to anticipate and plan for a reduced range of functioning results in an underestimation of required accommodations.

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is another important reason many interior design students, educators and practitioners are unconcerned with inclusive design at least within the United States. While the ADA represents an important legislative threshold, the ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) address minimal requirements primarily based on a separate-but-equal approach to accessibility (e.g., accessible entrances located to the rear, accessible routes located separately, and other accommodations stigmatised through the

large, blue and white 'handicapped' symbol).⁹ More importantly, the ADAAG's presence suggests federally mandated accessibility features are sufficient. Entrances, ramps and stairs, and toilet layouts have specified attributes based on prescriptive criteria, suggesting that innovative design thinking cannot and should not be used to address accessibility issues, and focuses attention on a few aspects of the environment. As a consequence, one of the biggest complaints by designers is that ADAAG standards result in all spaces looking the same. The prescriptive document also suggests that *designed* solutions are not valued by the disability community. Additionally, accessible design is believed to be 'one of a kind,' demanding highly specialised solutions for each user. One-user-one-solution thinking propagates the belief that moving beyond the ADA minimums is unnecessary unless requested by a client. This belief is often accompanied by the assumption that inclusive design solutions are expensive and, often, too expensive for a typical project.¹⁰

The perceived cost and the difficulty determining the cost benefit of inclusive design also serve as a hindrance to inclusive design. The cost benefits of sustainability, affordability and even safety have been presented as argument for their incorporation. Long-term energy cost savings weighed against resource expenditures is the driving force behind the sustainability movement. Likewise, low-cost homes for persons at or below the poverty line reduce the need for additional support resulting from substandard housing. Conversely, the images of flattened elementary schools help drive the call for shelters in schools regardless of the cost. Advocates and politicians are reticent to calculate of the cost of the lives of elementary school children.

The cost of participation by all members of our communities is less easily calculated. Existing research demonstrates that anticipatory accommodations result in a small percentage increase to new construction and contribute to a more successful design solution over the life of the project. For example, building lobbies frequently feature a grand stair designed as a focal point while the nondescript elevator is located discreetly to the side. The elevator cost could be seen as disproportionately high if attributed only to persons using wheelchairs. In contrast, the



Above left
Figure 1a, 1b: The Ed Roberts Center in Berkeley, California features an accessible ramp for vertical circulation. All users have the same experience of the space. Workspaces accommodate many users working independently or collaboratively.
Architect: Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects.
Photograph: Tim Griffith

true cost benefit must be spread across the broad continuum of users: parents pushing strollers, toddlers accompanying parents, persons with mobility impairments, seniors and people with disabilities who do not use assistive devices and delivery personnel all benefit from the elevator. Because the benefits of inclusion are spread over so many, it is difficult to identify specific cost savings. Inclusive thinking brings all users together in projects such as the *Ed Roberts Center* in Berkeley, California. The beautiful ramp not only provides a single solution for all users but also serves as an important design feature.

A significant barrier to the inclusion of people with disabilities is misunderstanding and fear. The perpetuation of the medical model of disability and associated stereotypes results in the wide range of knowledge, abilities, and skills uniquely possessed



Above right
Figure 2: The National Art Museum in Copenhagen features an elevator and stair core-oriented so that two individuals, each choosing a different method of ascent, have the same parallel orientation. Upon arrival, each is again oriented with the same view.
Architect: Anna Maria Indrio.
Photograph: Korydon H. Smith.

by each individual being overlooked. Someone who is deaf is treated as if they have mobility limitations and a person with a mobility limitation is spoken to very loudly. Etiquette of interaction, appropriate language, offers of assistance and curiosity about the individual result in awkward exchanges or in no exchange.

Barriers to inclusive environments must be put into context. Ubiquitous accessibility standards are viewed by people with disabilities as insufficient and represent a separate and unequal approach to inclusion. The immediate aftermath of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center illustrates the ramifications of what people with disabilities refer to as the 'afterthought' approach.¹¹ With the lights out and elevators inoperable, persons with mobility disabilities were instructed, per the emergency plan, to 'wait' to be assisted and, consequently, suffered the highest mortality rate of any group. Because standards and regulations regard disability as an 'other,' afterthought approaches such as 'wait' are presumed acceptable for people with disabilities. People with disabilities claim these instructions would not be tolerated if based on gender, age, race, ethnicity or education. Without the voice of people with disabilities incorporated into design solutions, marginalisation and injustice will continue to prevail.

Fundamentally, existing legislation and standards such as ADAAG are an extension of our societal values and, as such, reflect the medical model of disability and the belief that people with disabilities are outside the norm. Consequently, minimal design requirements perpetuating discriminatory and socially unjust design solutions are viewed as adequate solutions. The imposition of afterthought 'fixes', allowed and tacitly approved, perpetuates 'separate but equal' approaches to design schemas that undervalue people with disabilities as part of the human continuum. For this reason, it is critical to recognise that people with disabilities are a socially oppressed group and that existing design priorities and processes perpetuate the oppression.

Clearly, the assumption underpinning this paper is that interior design education does not foster the value system and knowledge necessary to achieve true inclusion. Emphasising what is *different* about people of various minority groups, prioritising aesthetics over the human condition and failing to advocate meaningful social change are shortcomings that undermine well-intended pedagogical efforts with regard to inclusion. Reimagining the role of the designer as activist empowers not only users of the built environment but also empowers students, as advocates of their profession and in their community. The final goal, good design that is fully functioning, aesthetically pleasing and universally inclusive, is achieved when this value shift is comprehensive and permanent.

DESIGN AS EMANCIPATION

If the design community is to consistently attain inclusion in the built environment, the social values perpetuating traditional design tenets and processes must change. Identifying and implementing



a new framework is difficult at all stages of a design career; for this reason, transformation is best accomplished early in the educational process. Of equal importance is the realisation that other disciplines, having already engaged in these value shifts, can provide a best practices process. An important precedent is the disability research community's transformation from traditional research to what is now known as emancipatory research.¹² Traditional research is entrenched in the scientific method, emphasising distance and objectivity within the process while acknowledged methods are constrained and formulaic. Findings are framed in perceived limitations and assumptions and are objectively stated within the existing body of knowledge. The investigator has the power, from the formation of the research question through final dissemination, over all aspects of the process and over all of the participants. This process is grounded in the belief that the researcher is the unchallenged expert.

In contrast, an emancipatory process prioritises goals specifically benefitting people with disabilities and, more importantly, including people with disabilities as collaborators underpins this process. Mike Oliver states the process '...should not be seen as a set of technical, objective procedures carried out by experts but part of the struggle by disabled people to challenge the oppression they currently experience in their daily lives.'¹³ Oliver further challenges the prevailing scientific method and interpretation of findings as disingenuous and offers the emancipatory paradigm as a way of refocusing efforts on the dissolution of social oppression.¹⁴

If students are to engage in emancipatory activities as nascent designers, assumptions about people with disabilities must be challenged through education and exposure, abolishing ignorance and

Above

Figure 3a, 3b: The Children's Museum of Pittsburgh features a single entrance that facilitates arrival by children, parents and grandparents equally. The Garage Activity Area provides access for children and adults of all sizes and abilities. The lift is located adjacent to the multi-storey play area. Architect: Koning Eizenberg Architecture, Inc. Photographs: Photojunkie.

fear through knowledge. How, then, should students be prepared to engage with those different from themselves? The most significant characteristics relevant to developing emancipatory design values include: 1) redistributing power within the social relationships of design; 2) adopting the biopsychosocial model of disability; and 3) facilitating users' reciprocity, gain and empowerment.¹⁵ These fundamental strategies are necessary before implementing overarching design processes and ensuring a long-term engagement in social justice.

Unequivocally, achieving emancipatory design also requires a deep and long-lasting realignment of both personal and cultural values. Our values, whether instilled at an early age or assimilated over a lifetime, grow or degrade with our repeated engagement and application. It is our experiences that are key. Instruction in an open and challenging environment provides for the experience of different viewpoints and encourages and reinforces values of inclusion that lead to emancipatory practices. In contrast, instruction that prioritises unquestioning respect for the status quo (e.g., ADAAG Checklist) and relies on penalties as a method of correction perpetuates tradition and conformity.

The transformed value system must be followed by professional standards of behaviour that advance the goal of emancipatory design. Codes of ethics currently associated with professional interior design organisations oblige design practitioners to conform to specific standards and 'comply with all ... laws, rules, regulations and codes'¹⁶ and they must 'consider the health, safety, and welfare of the public in the spaces they design.'¹⁷ There is, however, significant difference between 'do no harm' and emancipatory ethics, which call for advocacy and demand improvement of the human condition for all.

This thinking could be challenged on the basis of the law alone. The ADA demands an 'equivalent experience' for all people and thus a separate but equal approach to design is not acceptable.¹⁸ Current design ethics plainly do not oblige the designer to advance the social agenda of people with disabilities. Contemporary discourse reveals that codes of ethics in the design disciplines 'concentrate on personal responsibilities of architects [and designers of all disciplines] and ignore the bigger picture, which consists of social structure, power, unethical attitudes and behaviors of the profession.'¹⁹

Emancipatory values and associated ethical practices must transform design thinking and be established early in design education. Issues of social justice, professional responsibility and personal ethics must become explicit in every aspect of contemporary design education. Learning objectives and project briefs must clearly state expectations and student assessments must reinforce inclusion for all users. Accepting solutions that preference aesthetics or form over the inclusion of people with disabilities negates all preceding efforts. Can something exclusionary be beautiful? More importantly, design innovation that includes the widest range of users and challenges prescriptive standards must be celebrated.

BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

To achieve emancipatory design outcomes, it is necessary to distinguish between the medical and the biopsychosocial models of disability. The medical model conceptualises disability as a problem of the person, directly caused by disease, trauma, or health condition. Sustained medical care is intended to fix a broken person. In this model, barriers to the environment and to participation are the result of the person's lack of ability.

In contrast, the biopsychosocial model acknowledges functional differences and conceptualises disability as a problem caused by the cultural and ideological context of the social environment in response to the person's ability or specific level of functioning. Disability is created by disabling attitudes, and resulting disabling environments are socially constructed and culturally perpetuated, in essence a form of structural oppression.²⁰ As an extension of disability rights, an emancipatory framework removes disabling social and physical barriers and an emphasis on the abilities of disabled people to 'cope' or 'adapt.'

The built environment is a social construct reflecting the beliefs and values of its culture and so achieving emancipatory design requires significant change in the values of the design community. Emancipatory design requires that concepts of normal be replaced with a comprehensive knowledge of and respect for the entire range of human functioning. Along with the biopsychosocial model and other existing models such as the Person-Environment Fit model²¹ and Temporarily Able Bodied,²² design thinking can be transformed to accommodate the greatest variety of users possible. Dan Formosa, of Smart Design, explained the role of the extreme: 'Our clients come in and say "here is our average customer..." and we listen politely and that's great. But we don't care about that person. What we really need to do to design is look at the extremes... the person with arthritis... or the athlete.... If we understand what the extremes are, the middle will take care of itself.'²³ Concepts such as person-environment fit and the continuum of human functioning must become foundational education premises.²⁴

The inclusion of a biopsychosocial model of disability in the design studio fosters the belief that all users are to be included at the outset of all projects, thereby eliminating the separate but equal methodology. Adopting this model of human functioning also suggests categories inherent in instructional objectives such as 'design for disabilities' and courses titled *Universal Design Studio* be abolished. Students and practitioners must design for an unqualified continuum of users in every project and segregating thinking and language only perpetuates the problem.

PARTICIPATION

Emancipatory design must likewise narrow the distance between what is built and for whom it is built by bringing designers and users together. The emancipatory process engages people with

disabilities as insiders thereby framing the issues from the emic perspective.²⁵ The emancipatory process allows issues to emerge and rejects design solutions based on insufficient design standards. This process and the emic view achieve innovative, inclusive design solutions.

While participatory design practices are not new, seldom are they fully implemented. Henry Sanoff states that 'The activity of community participation is based on the principle that the environment works better if citizens are active and involved in its creation and management instead of being treated as passive consumers.'²⁶ Emancipatory processes require deep, sustained involvement from project inception through the final design assessment.

Participation, as a component of emancipatory values, makes inherent sense in the interior design studio and service learning projects are frequently steeped in these values.²⁷ The opportunity for students to have first-hand interaction with users, act upon the spaces and receive feedback from stakeholders is invaluable. These experiences remain the single best way to dispel myths and increase comfort when working with people with disabilities. Combined with other learning methods, reflective assignments enhance learning outcomes and should be used when working with people with disabilities on the design of interior spaces in home, work, and leisure settings.²⁸ Further, it is critical to emphasise that inclusion occurs when all users are given a voice at the beginning and throughout every project and not as superficial feedback following critical design decisions.

Common in disciplines such as counselling, values education is an increasingly popular method of instruction where issues of social justice are important. In contrast to experiences where students motivate their own learning, values education utilises a guide to instruct, focus, and reflect upon activities and facilitates a deeper understanding of issues. Long-term thinking should be introduced prior to short-term experiences. In contrast, role-playing is common when teaching students about human functioning. Blindfolds, wheelchairs and earplugs simulate reduced functioning and are effective for understanding task analysis such as cooking, toileting, or communicating. However, once a student initiates role-play, it is difficult to avoid the acknowledgement that the experience will end shortly and thus this new knowledge is equally short-lived. Instead, students must be instructed and coached to fully understand that individuals with different levels of functioning confront barriers in their environment daily over their lifespan. Experiential learning and service learning projects provide opportunities to meet and talk with clients and these activities result in focused, beneficial outcomes for a specific problem.

RECIPROCITY, GAIN, AND EMPOWERMENT

A traditional research process places the researcher in the role of expert and, as such, the individual responsible for the final interpretation and dissemination. Once data collection ends, participants may be informed of the generalised findings but their voice is inconsequential in telling the story of

their experience. An emancipatory protocol, in contrast, places the users in the role of the expert and assures that the findings are accessible to people with disabilities.

Oliver asks if researchers will 'use their expertise and skills in their [people with disabilities] struggles against oppression?'²⁹ Likewise, the intention and obligation of the designer requires a long-term commitment to reducing oppression and improving conditions for people with disabilities. In an emancipatory design process, this same distribution of rights and responsibilities must be shared between designers and users, allowing the design solutions to be shared and disseminated as an important method of reducing oppressive social relations. For-profit design firms such as IDEO, as well as not-for-profit design organisations such as Project H and academic community design centres, place their skills and knowledge into the hands of the community, enabling the residents and citizens to gain both broad knowledge of issues as well as specific solutions to problems. Even more importantly, these diverse entities are passionate advocates, assuming responsibility for securing community buy-in, educating stakeholders, and maintaining an active role from project conceptualisation through final implementation.

Design students, faculty and practitioners must engage in the greater fight for the emancipation of people with disabilities through design excellence. There must be careful consideration of the reciprocity in the relationship, ensuring gain for the users and empowering them by providing deliverables that remove barriers in the built environment. The opportunities for students to capture the attention of the media can be used to focus attention on significant social issues, not only facilitating resolution but solidifying students' understanding of the critical nature of their own work. Documentation of work, access to design solutions, donations of materials and labour and visibility for their struggle for a barrier-free life are meaningful contributions.

CONCLUSION

'Shouldn't being a designer mean more than the traditional model of object maker and creator of more crap? Shouldn't we be trusted to make things better?'³⁰

There is no better time than now, an era of socially driven design agendas, to address the far-reaching need for truly inclusive environments. The privilege and power of perceived 'typicals' – non-disabled people – drive current design priorities and it is this social context that must be changed by transforming current values in interior design education and practice.³¹ Characteristics of the emancipatory research paradigm can serve as an effective framework for this transformation.

Research and design cannot be perceived as perfectly parallel systems of discovery and problem solving. Traditional research, while not obligated by its nature to improve the human condition, nonetheless reveals the unknown or the unexplained, thereby providing critical knowledge about the world around us. It does not harm or endanger the wellbeing of individuals or society. Indeed,

the medical model of disability used in traditional research facilitates lifesaving interventions and makes everyday life easier and more fulfilling for many people with disabilities. Controlling diabetes and improving vision are two simple examples. Is traditional design equally meaningful? Designers and design critics might argue for form alone. More pragmatically, the purpose of design is to provide for people and their activities, fulfilling both individual and group needs and values while working within specific constraints. Good design is expected to avoid formulaic methods, challenge conventions and knowledge, and the peer review process recognises innovation. Inclusion does not subvert the other issues with regard to function or aesthetics but fulfils all criteria necessary to achieve good design.

It is at this point that traditional research and design comparisons must end. Is design that is not emancipatory at its very heart bad design? The answer must be yes. While research is still producing meaningful and useful information, design that is not emancipatory actively excludes people and prevents their participation as respected members of their family, their community, their workplace. Designers must be accountable for reducing the oppression of people with disabilities, moving from the minimal compliance of codes and convention to reducing oppression and increasing inclusion through environmental design. When is the exclusion of any person or group of people from participating in their government (e.g., US Capitol Building) or in their community good design?

Emancipatory core values as an integral component of design thinking must be established early in a student's career. A shifting value system is not about making someone feel bad. Instead, good design occurs because the other choices are understood as simply less effective. Using the biopsychosocial model of disability can transform students' thinking from categorical accommodations to an unqualified continuum of users sharing equivalent experiences. The biopsychosocial model demands that the focus shift from what the person can or cannot do to what barriers exist in the built environment. This value shift is not about making students (or anyone) feel bad; the value shift focuses on doing what is right because their values inform what is good: fully functioning, aesthetically pleasing and universally inclusive environments. Logically, interior design students and practitioners should be experts in removing physical barriers and not in fixing 'broken people'. The role of the designer, therefore, fits seamlessly into this model.

There are many ethical, legal, and financial reasons to teach and practice inclusive design.³² When inclusion comes first, it does not subvert other design goals. Designers of all disciplines and all levels of experience must understand that compliance with minimal requirements does not mean that they have provided for the greatest proportion of possible users. Marginalised and oppressed groups such as people with disabilities who struggle with the political process of empowerment are no longer prepared to tolerate exclusionary thinking based upon outmoded social relationships. Existing requirements, set forth in accessibility legislation, are increasingly challenged in the judicial system by citizen action groups and socially responsible individuals and organisations. Design thinking that is comfortable with the-least-you-can-do is tenuous ground in all aspects of practice.

In moving towards inclusive design a perceptual shift is required to ensure the inclusion of marginalised and oppressed persons. This begins with a collaborative design process in which individuals currently marginalised become actively engaged in the design process and their experiences are embodied within the overall design process. Ultimately, designers must approach challenges in a way that makes everyone feel truly included. Even when design objectives are removed directly from end users, the designer must maintain a personal goal to provide inclusive environments.

Unlike other methodological approaches, an emancipatory design process requires that knowledge and skills be placed at the disposal of people with disabilities. Consequently, educators must examine the level of engagement and follow by ensuring that all parties benefit from learning activities. Even more importantly, this paradigmatic shift places responsibility on the shoulders of educators to encourage and facilitate social activism on behalf of the people with disabilities and other marginalised persons. Empowerment must be the final outcome of the learning activities. Students are empowered by the experience of affecting change and will carry forward the important value shift. More importantly, people with disabilities and other user groups will be empowered by information and knowledge necessary to affect change in their own environments.

Len Barton states: 'there is the need to increasingly recognize and more thoroughly understand and practice the art of "listening" to the voices of disabled people.'³³ He further states that self-criticism is necessary on the part of the researcher, determining the meaningfulness of final outcomes. Likewise, the effectiveness of an emancipatory design process can only be discerned when the designer engages in a frank assessment, confirming the voices of people with disabilities have been heard.

These concepts are equally important and valid when working with all marginalised or underrepresented groups in all design settings. As Beth Tauke explains: 'The decisions that designers make about media, products, buildings, transportation systems, and urban/regional planning have profound, though often hidden, consequences on both individuals and collectives. Design innovations can foster certain types of freedom; however, they also can have caustic effects: discrimination, isolation, and segregation.'³⁴

Marginalised and underrepresented groups have pleaded for and sometimes demanded a social science that facilitates inclusion. This extends the need for an emancipatory, socially driven design process beyond people with disabilities. Acknowledging the significant contributions of the built environment with regard to identity development and self-actualisation, the foundational concepts of emancipation must be applied to all learning settings where students have the potential to serve as advocates. Service learning projects must extend beyond the delivery of a learning experience in the moment to result in the lifelong pursuit of equality for all.

When functioning is understood as a broad continuum and disability seen as a social construct, emancipatory design reveals the structures and processes that create disability. Emancipatory design becomes the deconstruction of prescriptive and pre-conceived solutions and engenders the application of good design. The establishment of a workable dialogue between the design community and people with disabilities is necessary to remove environmental barriers. Equally, users of the built environment and those who create it are empowered by the knowledge and understanding engendered through an emancipatory process.

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