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Designing systems for human wellbeing

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Every year, world leaders meet at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, to network and discuss global issues. While the forum has been severely criticized for its omnipotent attitude and disregard to real issues that impact on humanity, a recent meeting highlighted two significant issues: the dysfunctional global economic governance and the systemic nature of worldwide economic problems. On first sight, one could assume that these have very little to do with the challenges that designers, architects, town planners or managers are facing in their everyday. Systemic global problems and governance seem far away and not approachable from the operational grass-roots level.

But is this really so? Are the issues distant? They do appear to impact on our day-to-day, and somehow we read about them in the press on a constant basis. In their impotence, authorities raise their hands and capitulate. The dysfunctional global financial institutions based on greed make life expensive for the common man, and societies fail to provide even the most basic affordable services in health and education to their members.

The key observation is that the global issues touch both the bottom and the top of the global pyramid; the global economic system reaches to all levels, impacts on all members of society everywhere. One could argue that it is the supersystem of systems, the glue that binds things together. It trespasses the boundaries of almost every other global and local system; as a man-made designed and open system it is the media for exchanging matter and energy between its surroundings. It involves and consumes systemic inputs and produces outputs through processes that transform physical, social and virtual environments. It even transforms natural systems into hybrid man-nature ones, commercializing nature on many levels.

Thus practically all human activity, including design and designing, is affected by the global economic system (and evidently its problems). While it may not be conducive to evaluate the benevolence of the system, due to difficulty of agreeing a joint value framework, it does make sense to examine its existential rationale in relation to other systems. It could be argued that as long as the reason for the existence of the economic system does not explicitly support the Aristotelian [1] idea of eudaimonia, or good life or living and doing well, or in the similar vein Amartya Sen's [2] well being and living without shame, then none of the linked global systems can achieve singular success in these terms either. This implies that the glue that links the systems is essentially faulty in terms of enabling wide and inclusive human wellbeing.

There is hope however. Systems theory involves the idea of an interdisciplinary dialogue between areas of study, and as Bánáthy [3] notes, it involves a configuration of interconnected parts in a web configuration. As proposed furthermore by Holland [4], systems by their very nature are complex and adaptive, and possess evolutionary capability. Change wilfully one part of the system, and other parts and even linked systems are affected through emerging co-evolution that organises itself through internalised simple rules.

And where does design/designing come in? How would it relate to systems? And most importantly of all, can design and designing influence positively the idea of "good life", perhaps through transformative change on the economic system? From a welfare economics point of view these are the key questions one can ask about design/designing and its impact.

In attempting to look at these three questions, a revisit of Richard Buchanan's [5] thinking is useful, in terms of recognizing that design is a liberal art of technological culture[6]. This idea, together with the execution of this activity, designing, sets it within the realm of industrial production, with links to culture, arts and science. In other words, design/designing is inherently transdisciplinary, cutting across various systems and representations.

Borrowing and expanding on Buchanan also creates a systemic hierarchy within design/designing. In the first place it is about products, artefacts; this is the most common view of design, as products, while designing is essentially new product development (NPD). There are multiple nested systems within this area (clothing, domestic objects, tools, instruments, machinery, vehicles, to name a few). Secondly, services add another systemic set with its concern for connectivity and logistics. Still, it could be argued that designed environments are another set of systems, some simple, some extremely complex. Architects operate in this area, by nature linking multiple professions and (sometimes conflicting) aims. But it is the last category that presents the main opportunities for those involved in design. Systems can also be designed, possibly irrespectively of what the system is intended to do.

This is where integrative design thinking [7] comes in. Recognizing that systems co-evolve, are emergent in nature, operate right at the very edge of chaos, even when less than perfect, makes deductive or inductive reasoning obsolete. Thus traditional, linear and positivist models simply do not work. Designing systems is thus an inherently abductive, iterative and participatory process, that needs to depart from a human centred approach, joining empathy, creativity and rationality to create new futures. Designing systems inherently involves nested systems of products, services, and environments: it is thus almost a supersystem of its own.

In this context, the window of opportunity of designing systems that aim for human well being is obvious, and this drives in turn the economic system to align itself with these aims (improving the economic glue). That being said, the designed system must involve an economic rationale to achieve sustainability. But this is distinct from simple financial profit making in the traditional sense (although it may also mean a financial return of investment). Thus design/designing can

significantly contribute to systems, but arguably only when it addresses the systemic level with a holistic mindset. This implies that designers must leave their ivory towers and engage (with the rest) to co-create. That is what design/designing is all about: joint better futures for us all.

References

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