Designing for interdependence

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Otto von Busch is a researcher at the School of Design and Craft at University of Gothenburg. He explores the emergence of a new "hacktivist" designer role in fashion, where the designer engages participants to reform fashion from a phenomenon of dictations and anxiety to a collective experience of empowerment, in other words, where designers strive to make participants become fashion-able.

The world of design might be one of the firmest bastions for "Intelligent Design" in modern society. Nowhere is the faith so strong in the genius of the designer, with his pure intentions, great skill and almighty power to change the world. If we listen to designers explaining their latest chair design it seems to be created from thin air, materialized through some magical ritual, as if there were no chairs before this, and as if evolution of ideas does not occur in the realm of chairs. A better life for all emanates from the mind of the original designer.

It seems like designers can only think of one person at the time: either themselves or their client. Usually the clients are not too dissimilar to the designers themselves. If design has caught anything from evolution, it might be the quasi-Darwinian approach of "survival of the fittest". A good designer helps his customers to become fit to survive in the harsh reality of life. Humans are, in the eyes of design, lone and independent predators roaming the streets for prey.

We design for independence. We design automatic doors and rolling bags. The basic idea is that we design to never ask anyone else for help. We also design perfect weather forecasts and interactive maps. So that we will never need anyone's advice or guidance. To manage the world on one's own is the ultimate proof of success and basically a better world from our design perspective. If we go somewhere where we have never been, at least we carry a Lonely Planet guide with us which has everything already probed and tested. We stay at hostels and

hotels where we only meet fellow lonely tourists. Backpackers might orbit the planet but with the help of Internet they actually never feel like leaving home. The airlock was never opened to even breath the air of another atmosphere. Following this, increasing gated communities and an arms race in security is a logical step in today's design paradigm where atomized individuals are constantly on their guard as they have never interacted with anything strange or unfamiliar, already mediated through designed interfaces. We are those interface designers.

Let us just examine a fantastic design a little closer to see the logics behind independent design. This is a design which has affected the world greatly and made people more secure; the safety belt for cars. The brilliant three-point belt was invented at the labs of Volvo in the end of the 1950s by the engineer Nils Bohlin as a part of the commercial company Volvo's wishes to make cars safer and better which in the long created a market position for Volvo as "the safe car". Or at least that is what the myth says. Mr Bohlin did indeed create the Volvo safety belt, but the work of innovation and the awareness raising process was conducted the decades before by civil institutions. The workers unions realized that traffic accidents were commonplaces for workplace injuries, and the hospitals received many severely injured patients and wanted new safety measures for the citizens. The safety belt was not an invention from a lone genius in his lab but just the tip of a wider social articulation of risk management.

But let us now consider this brilliant invention a second time. In all its good intentions and successful design – has it made the streets safer? Well, yes indeed we might say. And now with new airbags and steel frames the cars are safer than ever. But what if we look at it from the perspective of civil society? Do safe drivers really drive safely?

The three-point belt indeed saves the driver in an accident. It reduces the chance for injuries significantly for the wearer of the belt. But it does not save the victim who got hit by the heavy metal car. The victim stays at lethal risk, and might even be more at risk as the driver feels safe and increases his speed. The design and arms race in safety is based on the intention to save the driver – at any cost. The safety belt is designed for the lone predator, the human striving for maximum independence.

So could we design car safety from a perspective of interdependence? Perhaps we could design something that makes the driver not locked into a safe bubble, but something that makes him an attentive and concerned driver. We need drivers who become better at avoiding accidents rather than feel safer. A proposal that makes the driver aware of the fragility of the world around him, and that racing a heavy piece of metal machinery among soft organic bodies is an act of great risk. For a lot of people around.

Could we imagine the "safety-spear" – a sharp lance sticking out from the steering wheel pointing to the driver's chest? If he would hit something on his way he would surely be injured. Would we have the same problems with ruthless drivers? Would people drive drunk if they primarily risked their own lives? There are of course ethical problems with such a device, and punishment-driven design is not desirable for anyone, but how can we as designers shift focus

and consider designing for interdependence rather than independence? What if Nils Bohlin at Volvo had thought about saving other people, and not primarily the driver?

We can have a quick look at the prisoner's dilemma to expose this situation. Take for example traffic jams. Most people on the streets take the car to their jobs. Some take public transport. We all are stuck in traffic. But the bus always has to stop at the bus stops, so most certainly the car is always faster as it goes directly to the intended destination. But if everyone takes the car, we all get stuck even more in traffic. From the perspective of car industry we would have to create more comfortable cars with air cleaners and DVD players so we can better stand the waiting times. The better we make the cars, the more people will take their comfy car to work and sit in even longer queues. The DVD movies will have to be even longer.

So how should we design to make more people take the bus and thus ease the pressure on the roads? We must move transversally through the dilemma. One way is to limit the size of the road and introduce a special priority bus lane. Another is to create telecommunication tools so people can work from home. And we need more solutions. We must think outside of the paradigm framed by the "rules" of the dilemma itself.

As with the safety belt, we design tools for surveillance and security which insinuates that every citizen is a potential thief or villain. Cameras observe us all in the shops as if in every one of us there is a small criminal waiting for the right moment to come out. If we do not suppress the urge for stealing, we would all steal – wouldn't we? You can't trust anyone! But is that not because we have designed away all possibilities to show trust? Where will I have the possibility to grow trust in people when isolating gadgets surround me? We designers have played a central role in the creation of today's fragmented and isolationist society.

So now with all smart electronic systems, couldn't we rethink how interactions in society are designed? We can create objects which *require* collaboration to work, or at least which signal confidence and responsibility rather than mistrust. With all electronic locks these days, could we not make doors which are always open, until an uninvited guest approaches and the door locks? Could we not at least design doors which feel very good to hold open for other people?

We can also imagine objects which require two to operate. Imagine a backpack which is like a basket on my back, with all my personal belongings in, but which I cannot reach without the help of others. When my phone rings I must approach someone and ask – "Can you help pick up my phone?"

These are of course utopian ideas that would not always work. Growing mutual confidence in our fellow humans is not done overnight. But in their design our designed utopias would expose trust and suggest responsible behaviour among our fellow mortals. Can we design interactions which reward confidence and mutuality? Design could articulate how we humans are social and collaborative animals rather than cruel and lonely wolves. Next time we are suggested to design against crime, could we instead consider designing for mediation, for reciprocal altruism, for reconciliation?

Like so many other design dilemmas there is no immediate or straight answer. But every step we take in growing interdependence will take us on a journey towards growing trust. Interdependence, a paradox of design, reveals itself rather like a Zen-Buddhist *koan*, a non-rational question or statement:

- What if it's a disaster?

- It's that too.

Further readings

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