Design, Democracy and Agonistic Pluralism

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Abstract

In this paper, the author presents an alternative approach to 'design for democracy,' drawing on the notion of agonistic pluralism. Specifically, the author highlights the differences between politics and the political within agonistic pluralism, and employing examples of contemporary design projects, discusses how these differences can been seen in the objects and practices of design. Through this critical examination, the author contributes a new perspective to the discourses of 'design for democracy' and expands the possibilities for democratic action and critique available to both practicing designers and design scholars.

Keywords

Over the past decade there has been an increased interest in 'design for democracy.' Not only are these efforts significant for design practice, they also suggest new topics and trajectories for design scholarship. However, within the mainstream practices and discourses of 'design for democracy,' the notion of what constitutes democracy is relatively unexamined. If we study the projects and papers that populate this arena, it seems our familiar notions of democracy are taken as a given good: it is implicitly accepted that democracy is a matter of pursuing consensus through activities of structured deliberation and 'design for democracy' primarily involves improving the mechanisms of participation in politics. Although such endeavours are crucial, they do not express the range of democratic action and critique available to practicing designers or design scholars.

In fact, the concept of democracy is neither given nor fixed. What democracy was to the Greeks is not usually what we consider as democracy today, and democracy in the United States is different is different from democracy in Sierra Leone, which is different from democracy in France. Even within a single nation-state system, the ideals and practices of democracy vary widely. As a thought experiment, we can consider democracy along a spectrum. At either end of the spectrum are governing principles and associated concerns, which serve to characterize democracy and suggest possible courses of action and critique. At one end of the spectrum, the governing principle is consensus and the associated concerns are those of access to information and procedures. At the other end, the governing principle is contestation and the associated concerns are those of revealing and challenging hegemony. Although such a diagrammatic model of democracy is simplistic and exaggerated, it is useful for considering the range of differences within the concept we call democracy.

The diversity of ideas about what constitutes democracy *should* have impact on design and design studies because they suggest different, at times fundamentally different, courses of action, themes for inquiry, and bases for judgment and critique. The trouble is that the exemplars of design practice and scholarship that fall within the context of 'design for democracy' overwhelmingly gather at that end of the spectrum governed by the principle of consensus and the associated concerns of access to information and procedures. Thus, we have a limited notion of what counts as 'design for democracy.' This is a problem because if design is to truly serve democratic ends, and if design scholars are to study the relations between design and democracy, then an understanding of the range of democratic thought and action is necessary in order to better design artefacts and systems that enable or enact democratic conditions, and more rigorously study those products and their contexts of use.

In this paper I will present an alternative approach to 'design for democracy,' drawing on the notion of agonistic pluralism. Specifically, I will highlight the differences between politics and the political within agonistic pluralism, and employing examples of contemporary design projects, discuss how these differences can been seen in the objects and practices of design. In doing so, it is not my intention to dismiss or diminish existing important efforts in mainstream 'design for democracy'

projects, but rather, to outline a wider range of possibilities for democratic action and critique available to designers and design scholars.

Agonistic Pluralism: A Model for Rethinking Democratic Action and Critique

Agonistic pluralism is a model of democracy grounded in productive conflict or contest. In theories of agonistic pluralism, democracy is cast as an endeavour of fervent competition and struggle among competing ideals, values and beliefs. This competition and struggle takes place through all forms of social practice and material assemblages, including customs, laws, institutions, the built environment and designed products. In contrast to more familiar notions of democracy epitomized by scholars such as Habermas and Rawls (Habermas 1989; Habermas 1996; Rawls 1971; Rawls 1993), which prize rational deliberation and consensus, theories of agonistic pluralism acknowledge the presence and necessity of radical difference and contentious expression in the practice of democracy. This is not to say that rational deliberation and consensus are impossible from the perspective of agonistic pluralism, but they are not the default or required conditions and qualities of democracy (Connolly 1991; Connolly 1995; Honig 1993; Lalcau and Mouffe 1995; Mouffe 2000, Mouffe 2000b).

For political theorist Chantal Mouffe, the beginnings of an agonistic pluralism reside in recognizing the paradox of democracy: that a pluralistic society is a goal that must be pursued, but can never be fully achieved (Mouffe 2000b). The pursuit of a pluralistic democratic society is characterized by conflict because it is conflict, expressed as tension, friction and dissension, that defends against the erasure of difference. As Mouffe states:

> What is specific and valuable about modern liberal democracy is that, when properly understood, it creates a space in which this confrontation is kept open, power relations are always being put into question and no victory can be final. However, such an 'agonistic' democracy requires accepting that conflict and division are inherent to politics and that there is no place where reconciliation could be definitively achieved as the full actualization of the unity of 'the people'. (Mouffe 2000b, p. 15)

Drawing from Mouffe, one of the tasks of those wishing to support and further democracy is, then, creating and enabling these spaces of contest. In such spaces, difference and dissensus are brought forward and the assumptions and actions that shape power relations and influence are revealed and challenged.

There are a multiplicity of these spaces of contest and a multiplicity of forms and modes of agonism. In fact, one of the characteristics of agonism pluralism that sets it apart from more familiar models of democracy is that it does not require, or even desire, a unified public sphere or uniform set of procedures to enact democratic ideals. Often, and particularly within the academy, the spaces of contest are discursive: lectures, journals and books. Beyond the academy they include the organizing and lobbying activities of social movements, such as those concerned with labour, human rights or the environment. The legislative and judicial systems are also active spaces of contest, as conflicting and competing ideals, values and beliefs are played out through laws and regulations: the contests concerning abortion in the United States being a prime example (see Honig 1993). The questions from the perspective of design then are: *How can we distinguish design in the context of agonistic pluralism from more mainstream objects and practice of 'design for democracy?'* and *How can design objects and practices work in support of an agonistic pluralism?*

Politics and the Political in Agonistic Pluralism

In discourses of agonistic pluralism, politics and the political have distinct meanings. These distinct meaning are useful for distinguishing among designed objects and practices and beginning to describe alternate — agonistic — 'design for democracy' endeavours. In the discourses of agonistic pluralism, politics are *the means* by which a state, organization or other social order is held together: politics are the structures and mechanisms that enable governing. These range from codified laws and procedures to unspoken but observed habits of interpersonal interaction and performances of beliefs and values. Different from these means, the political is *a condition* of

society. It is a condition of ongoing opposition and contest. This condition is experienced and expressed in a multiplicity of ways, from debate to acts of provocation, protest and resistance.

Within discourses of agonistic pluralism, the problem with politics is that the structures and mechanisms of governance often hide or mitigate the essential contests of life. In benign forms, this occurs in an effort to lessen public strife and smooth the processes of governance. In less benign situations, politics become the very methods of extending hegemony by feigning to provide opportunities for expression and action, thereby re-directing or sublimating contestation and reinforcing the status quo (Honig 1993; Mouffe 2000). Put another way, politics often functions to *counter* the political. This is a problem because following from the frame of agonistic pluralism, engaging the essential contests of society is an inherent and necessary characteristic of the democratic endeavour. Whether benign or not, diverting attention away from the political by a focus on politics, i.e., a focus on the improving the mechanisms of governance, can endanger the practice of democracy because it draws us away from engaging in the contestation necessary for democracy.

The difference between politics and the political has significance to the practice and study of 'design for democracy' because it allows us to make meaningful distinctions between projects based upon how they engage with the democratic endeavour. Most 'design for democracy' projects fall within the realm of politics, with a focus on improving structures and mechanisms that enable governing. They are 'design *applied to* politics', or 'design *for* politics.' While such projects are important, they are not political in an agonistic sense and they do not represent the range of possible thought and action available to design within the democratic endeavour. If we accept the notion of agonistic pluralism as at least one possible approach to democracy, then we should ask, *What are examples of 'political design' rather than 'design for politics?'* and *How, as design studies scholars, would we describe, analyze and judge such practices and objects?*

Exploring The Differences Between Design for Politics and Political Design

The most direct way to explore the differences between design for politics and political design is by comparison of projects that fall within these rubrics. The Design for Democracy (DfD)[1] initiative within the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) is emblematic of design for politics. Although it does not encapsulate all of the activities that fall under the general rubric of 'design for democracy,' it is a concerted effort to provide a professional organizational structure to such efforts within the United States, and as such provides a salient example. According their self-description, DfD "applies design tools and thinking to increase civic participation by making interactions between the U.S. government and its citizens more understandable, efficient and trustworthy." (AIGA 2008) The programs within the DfD initiative are indeed broad reaching. They include the *Get Out The Vote* program which solicits non-partisan graphic design to promote voter registration and participation; the *Government Officials: Get Help* program which provides design services to "make government more accessible, transparent, and efficient" (ibid); the *Polling Place Photo Project* which solicits and presents citizen journalism documenting the voting experience in the United States; a design advocacy program to promote the importance of design in government; and the *Ballot and Election Design* program which strives to improve the experience and increase the efficacy of voting through the redesign of ballots, polling place signage, instructional materials and poll-worker training materials.

As a counterpoint, the *Million Dollar Blocks*[2] project provides an example of political design: it is a project that is implicitly contestational and demonstrates one notion of what 'design for democracy' might be like from the perspective of agonistic pluralism. Developed by Laura Kurgan at the Spatial Information Design Lab at Columbia University, *Million Dollar Blocks* uses geographic information systems (GIS) to map crime-related data. Rather than asking, *Where does crime occur?* or *Who are the victims of crime?*, as is the common approach to crime-mapping projects, Kurgan begins the project with the question, *Where does the prison population come from?* The primary product of the project is a series of maps of fours cities (Phoenix, Wichita, New Orleans, and New York),

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[1] See http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm/design-for-democracy, access January 24, 2010.

[2] See http://www.spatialinformationdesignlab.org/projects.php?id=16, accessed January 24, 2010.

which graphically depict the distribution of the residences of prison inmates throughout the respective cities. In addition to the maps and related information graphics, Kurgan and her colleagues have produced two self-published books documenting the process and issues, *The Pattern* and *Architecture and Justice* and a scenario-planning workshop (and accompanying documentation) with design professionals and community, civic, and social justice organizations and individuals.

The efforts of DfD in election design have had direct and measurable effect: in 2007 the U.S. Election Assistance Commission accepted the AIGA guidelines for ballot and polling place information design; the *Polling Place Project* has garnered significant participation with thousands of photos submitted and presented; and the *Get Out The Vote* program has produced dozens of compelling posters, replicated in the thousands. This work is exemplary of design for politics: the purpose of the work is to support and improve the mechanisms and procedures of governance. This purpose is clear in the positioning of the work and the stated motivations, e.g., increasing voter participation, making government more transparent and efficient, increasing the efficacy of voting through design.

In contrast, *Million Dollar Blocks* does not work to support and improve existing means of governance. Rather, it strives to critically investigate an issue and raise questions concerning the conditions of that issue. By asking *Where does the prison population come from?,* Kurgan reframes the discussion of crime and the built environment. As she states:

> By focusing solely on [crime] events, the human underpinnings of crime were left largely unaffected. When we shift the maps' focus from crime events to incarceration events, strikingly different patterns become visible. The geography of prison differs in important ways from the geography of crime. (Kurgan 2008)

From this question more questions follow. A key question for Kurgan is, *Is their pattern in this data that reflects a pattern in an underling condition?* and if so, *How might the recognition and interrogation of that pattern bring to light inequalities as they are manifested in the urban environment?* The title of the project — *Million Dollar Blocks* — comes from the recognition that there is indeed a pattern: within any given city, there are sets of city street blocks in which the government is spending more than $1,000,000 annually to incarcerate residents of those blocks. Discovery and articulation of this pattern then raises further questions such as *Who lives on those blocks?*, *What are those blocks like?,* and *How might that money be otherwise spent and perhaps to better effect?* The *Million Dollar Blocks* project can thus be considered as exemplary of political design because it functions to reveal, question and even challenge conditions and structures in the urban environment, that is, it opens a space for contest, and too, it suggests new practices of design in mapping and urban planning.

Agonistic Pluralism and the Work of Political Design

One way to approach the description, analysis and critique of political design in design studies is by examining its purpose, or the work it is supposed to do. Simply stated, the purpose of political design is to do the work of agonism. This means first and foremost it does the work of creating spaces for revealing and confronting power relations, i.e., it creates spaces of contest. This occurs both in and through the objects and processes of design: the objects and processes of design are both the site and means of agonistic pluralism. For example, in the case of *Million Dollar Blocks*, the maps document the existing configurations and conditions of power, and serve as objects through which contestational claims can be made and arguments advanced. It is important to note that the processes of design can be agonistic and political as well. For example, the act of problem definition can be a contestational effort, as when Kurgan inverts the standard modes and directives of crime mapping, by shifting the question from *Where does crime occur?* to *Where does the prison population live?*

We can, however, be even more exacting in describing the work of political design. Through the process of creating spaces for revealing and confronting power relations and influence, political design identifies new terms and themes for contestation and new trajectories for action. Most often, and almost by definition, these terms, themes and trajectories are contra to those of common practices and discourses, and contra to design for politics.

The *Million Dollar Blocks* project engages in precisely this endeavour of identifying terms, themes and trajectories and runs counter to the utilitarian framing of design for politics. Beyond the literal naming of a condition (as 'Million Dollar Blocks'), the project reveals previously obscured configurations in the cycle of crime and incarceration. Through this revealing, these conditions and structures become available for debate and further investigation. In subtle but profound ways, the design artefacts and activities of the project question and challenge how we understand and use crime statistics and practices of mapping, and reveal what understandings, uses and implications we leave out of our analyses and representations. This is exemplified in a quote by Kurgan, describing the maps of the *Million Dollar Blocks* project,

> With this map, we stop talking about where to deploy police resources or how to track individual prisoners for institutional purposes; instead we begin to assess the impact of justice on a city, even a city block, and start to evaluate some of the implicit decisions and choices we have been making about our civic institutions. (Kurgan 2008)

These maps, then, provide the opportunity for an ongoing series of contests and dissensus concerning the relationship between crime, the built environment and policy; the political affects of maps as artefacts; mapping as a practice; and the city as a series of relationships between people and space. With this notion of revealing and contest, we can begin to consider political design as a kind of inquiry into the political condition. That is, whereas design for politics strives to provide solutions to given problems within given contexts, political design strives to articulate the elements that are constitutive of social conditions. Such a notion of political design as inquiry is hinted at when, in being asked about the purpose of the *Million Dollar Blocks* project, Kurgan replied, "I am not trying to find the solution, I am trying to find the right questions." (Kurgan 2008) The purpose of political design generally, and the efficacy of the *Million Dollar Blocks* project specifically, is not to be found in improving usability, extending functionality or achieving a readily identifiable form of change. Rather, the purpose is to prompt and act as evidence in new discourses and practices and as the foundation of new questions.

Conclusion

While projects such as increasing the legibility and use of voting ballots or providing access to the facts of issues ranging from climate change to healthcare are important, they are not political in an agonistic sense. Rather, they serve to support the generally accepted means of politics, and in the process, they may mitigate some of the productive tension, friction and dissension within society. The *Million Dollar Blocks* project provides a particularly useful example of an alternative — agonistic — approach to design. One value of it as an example is its familiarity in form and medium and its relative gentleness in contestation. This is of value because it serves to illustrate that political design that does the work of agonism need not fall prey to common misconceptions about conflict and contestation. Terms such as contestation often garner images of radicals clinging to extreme positions and beliefs, which they communicate in an aggressive and rough fashion, through outsider means. Such stereotypes inhibit taking political design seriously. *Million Dollar Blocks* is thus also a useful example because it demonstrates that political design can, and often does, consist of actions and processes from within, using familiar mediums and forms, to subtly, but powerfully, reveal and question the conditions and issues of democracy.

Although by no means complete, this essay makes a claim for the inclusion of agonistic pluralism in the practices and discourses of 'design for democracy.' Furthermore, it suggests how we might describe design that supports or fosters agonism by way of the distinction between politics and the political, and offers a distinction between design for politics and political design. In contemporary design, projects such as *Million Dollar Blocks* are the anomaly rather than the norm: there is much more work in the realm of design for politics than the political design. However, if we accept a broader notion of democracy, which includes agonistic pluralism as one among many possible conceptualizations of democracy, then we should accept that political design, such as *Million Dollar Blocks*, has a role to play in the democratic endeavour, and is one option of action and critique for practicing designers and design scholars.

The challenge for design scholars is to further consider how we might describe, analyze and judge these works. One possible framing device for design scholars is to consider how political design

works to create spaces for the confrontation of power relations and influence by the identification of new terms and themes for contestation and new trajectories for action. We could ask of these works: *What new terms and themes were identified?*, *How do they reveal and challenge hegemony?,* and *What new trajectories for action are set?* The next step for design scholars is to build a discourse around political design, and to explore other alternative conceptualizations of democracy and their implications for practicing designers and design studies. This endeavour will not unfold overnight, but it offers unique topics and courses of action for designers and design scholars interested in the broad context of 'design for democracy.'

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