

POSITION STATEMENTS & RESOURCE REVIEWS

DESIGNING FOR A WORLD IN NEED

Victor Margolin

While rich nations continue to resist fair trade policies, debt forgiveness, and generous aid programs, statistics easily demonstrate the lopsided distribution of wealth in the world and portray the dire circumstances in which many of the world's inhabitants live. Between 1960 and 1995, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the 20 wealthiest countries more than doubled from 18 times that in the poorest countries to 37 times larger. Between 1980 and the late 1990s, the gap between the rich and the poor *within* many countries also increased. In some countries, the income gap is so great that, according to a recent study by economists at the United Nations University, poverty-reduction targets cannot be achieved, even with the projection of a reasonable economic growth.

The dearth of adequate living conditions for all people on earth severely violates the human rights enumerated in two fundamental United Nations documents, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 10, 1948, and the Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child, proclaimed by that same assembly on November 20, 1959. Both documents, ratified by almost all member nations of the UN, recognize the dignity of each human being.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." They are due such fundamental entitlements as security, recognition under law, asylum from persecution, freedom from slavery, and the right to own property, to work, and to go to school. Article 25 asserts that "Everyone has the right

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to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services...¹ To these rights, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by all member states of the UN except Somalia and the United States, adds additional benefits such as special treatment for children who are physically, mentally, or socially handicapped and protection against neglect, cruelty, and exploitation.

The rights in these two declarations derive from the values of the Enlightenment and are also embodied in the constitutions of most countries. Although many pay lip service to them, few commit to their full realization, and some ignore them altogether. A *politics of principle*, which signifies a commitment to assuring rights for all, competes against a *politics of power*, which is grounded in the individual, organizational, and national pursuit of self-interest. Among those social actors engaged in a politics of principle are many non-governmental civil society groups that are committed to healing the world's wounds.

Civil society and social action

The rise of civil society as a global political entity is a new phenomenon in world politics. Theorists of globalization such as James Rosenau have charted its growth as a counter force to the nation state in confronting many of the world's problems. To evolve new commitments or otherwise reorganize their hierarchy of loyalties. Civil society is an amoeba-like mass of social actors who operate within groups and organizations of varying sizes, ranging from a few hundred to many thousands. They do not have the legal rights of states but they do engage actively in the global debates on how to improve the world condition. For many, civil society organizations provide a way to participate in these debates that is not available through the conventional channels of international statist politics.

Several thousand non-governmental organizations or NGOs are affiliated with the United Nations. Members attend special UN sessions as observers and sometimes as participants. For more than a decade, civil society groups have been holding their own meetings at almost all the large United Nations conferences, including the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the World Conference on Women in 1995, the Conference on Human Settlements in 1996, and the World Conference Against Racism in 2001. Civil society's emergence as a site of power at all levels from the local to the global provides new opportunities for citizens to engage in social action. Civil society organizations have only recently become a force on the global stage and will continue to negotiate with official entities for the right to act in a socially responsible manner.

A social agenda for designers

The intense commitment of civil society, as well as some national governments, to address the world's problems is a strong sign of hope. Clearly many citizens' groups have found a space in the public arena to work for social change. What is notable, however, among these civil society groups is the paucity of designers and design organizations. Historically, the public has not understood design to be a socially conscious practice. Design has been

¹ Quotations are from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Both it and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child are available from www.un.org.

closely allied with the market and has developed in collaboration with organizations that offer products and services for sale. This is certainly the case for product design and graphic design, although graphic designers have worked on many cultural projects such as the design of books and exhibitions. Architects have a mixed record. Their involvement with affordable housing and community centers, for example, lags far behind their design of condominiums, shopping malls, and high-rise office towers.

Design is essentially a middle class profession that has delivered a comfortable life for middle class people, while also indulging the wealthy. Designers have created attractive furniture and other household items; relatively inexpensive appliances and transportation; pleasing fashions, and abundant leisure time products. The dark side of this success, however, is that it addresses the lives of a very small segment of the world's population and even within that population it leaves out those with special needs such as the aged and the disabled. The majority of people in the world are not only without middle-class comfort, but many also lack the basic means of survival: adequate shelter, food, education, and health care.

Design as a form of capital

Before we address the question of a new social agenda for designers, we must first assess the political limits of design itself. Design is an act of invention; a process of conception and planning that can result in material or immaterial products. The conditions for creating a product are generally embodied in a situation; that is, a set of social circumstances where a material or immaterial design intervention is called for. Simple examples would be the design of a housing project, the creation of a theater poster, or even the design of a smart bomb. Historically, designers have depended on situations created by others - developers, manufacturers, publishers, the military. Only rarely, as when the architect Jaime Lerner was the mayor of Curitiba, Brazil, in the 1970s and 1980s, have designers had the authority to create situations themselves. Should designers wish to direct their knowledge and skills to the satisfaction of human needs, they are faced with the fact that a system of support to achieve this end is necessary. They therefore need to create situations of practice themselves or else find partners with whom they can work. This means organizing such situations so they can meet the required conditions for a project's realization.

The design community has little experience in creating design situations to address social needs. The ability to do this would go a long way towards helping potential partners in civil society and government understand how designers might collaborate with them. To address this problem, I want to propose a model of practice based on five kinds of capital that, I suggest, constitute a design situation. In doing so, I aim to facilitate the designer's ability to clearly define a design intervention in relation to other elements necessary for an effective project. My choice of the term "capital" follows its earlier definition in the field of political economy as found in the Oxford English Dictionary: "wealth in any form used to help in producing more wealth." However, I use "capital" both literally and metaphorically to characterize the different resources that are required to realize a project. I don't wish to conflate capital with capitalism, particularly in its present global incarnation, nor do I limit wealth to goods, property, and money. It also represents the conditions of human well being. The five capitals I include are human capital, social capital, financial capital, institutional capital, and physical capital. Together, they constitute the elements of a design situation.

The term, *human capital* identifies human resources and abilities as a source of wealth. T. W. Schultz and other economists initially developed the idea of human capital in the late 1950s and economist Gary Becker used it as the basis for an important research study in 1964. Buttressed by empirical research such as Becker's, it has been employed successfully to justify increased expenditures in education and training to improve workforce abilities.

Political scientist Robert D. Putnam defines *social capital* as the "collective value of all 'social networks' [who people know] and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other ['norms of reciprocity']."² Political scientists and sociologists, among them Putnam and James S. Coleman took it up beginning in the late 1980s. Recently, the World Bank identified social capital as a key component of successful development projects.

James Coleman relates social capital to physical capital and human capital. "Just as physical capital is created by changes in materials to form tools that facilitate production, human capital is created by changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways. Social capital, however, comes about through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action. If physical capital is wholly tangible... and human capital is less tangible...social capital is less tangible yet, for it exists in the *relations* among persons."³ Following Coleman, I would then add the remaining two capitals - *financial capital*, which facilitates the exchange of labor, goods, and services, and *institutional capital*, which I characterize as the organizational structures and social systems of rules and regulations that make a project possible.

These five capitals are well understood by actors in the market place such as manufacturers and real estate developers. In fact, human capital and social capital have now become the currency of management gurus who seek to improve corporate performance by advocating investment in employee training and the formation of cooperative teams. Until recent years, the designer was a modest figure in this market structure, having only recently moved from the role of stylist to that of a full partner in the product development process. For a corporation such as General Electric, the development of a new refrigerator, would unite the five capitals in the following way: The human capital would consist of the collective knowledge of the designers, marketing experts, engineers, and economists, who put together a product's specifications, costs, production process, and sales plan. The social capital would accrue from the way a project team is organized to synthesize this knowledge into a plan and to develop a collaborative work process. The physical capital is the aggregate of manufacturing equipment and material required to produce the refrigerator. The financial capital is provided by the company as an investment in the refrigerator for which an estimated return is expected. The institutional capital is, on the one hand, the corporate organization and its marketing apparatus and on the other, the set of federal manufacturing and consumer regulations that enable the refrigerator to be marketed. Corporations have a long history of integrating these five capitals into the development, manufacture, and sale of products and we can consider this integration to be a system. Despite its vastness, the market is a relatively coherent structure that makes possible the production of goods and services and their movement across the world.

² This definition comes from the website www.bowlingalone.com/socialcapital.php³

³ James S. Coleman, "Social Capital and the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (Issue Supplement: Organizations and Institutions: Sociological and Economic Approaches to the Analysis of Social Structure) (1988): 101.

A system to serve social needs

Manufacturers have learned to cope with the market's complexities and have become skilled at negotiating the different legal codes, language differences, currency conversions, and social policies that constitute it. However, no comparable systems exist in which designers can easily create and distribute goods and services for social needs. What contributes to the difficulty of developing such systems is that they do not function like the market. Goods and services in the marketplace animate the circulation of financial capital, while short-term financial goals tend to dominate market behavior. By contrast, social service delivery systems absorb financial capital and convert it into human and social capital. Much work for social need is remedial; that is, it aims to transform unhealthy situations and individuals into healthy ones. Once people become healthy, they can then contribute to the market but the social return on investment is much lengthier and less certain than it is for the market system.

When we attempt to bring the five capitals together for design projects to meet social needs, we immediately run into difficulties. First, regarding human capital, the number of designers motivated to work in the social service sector is quite small compared to the large numbers who work in the market sector. Second, few designers have learned how to join with partners in the social service sector to create networks of social capital to address the world's many needs. Third, the physical capital to produce socially necessary goods exists but is presently employed almost entirely to meet market demands. Fourth, there is a severe shortage of financial capital to fund social projects. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh has shown that extending micro credit to small entrepreneurs is highly effective but the problem of funding projects on a larger scale still remains. While some initiatives do have moneymaking potential they are of relatively low interest to investors because they do not promise as large a rate of return as products for the middle-class and luxury markets.⁴ Rather than make modest investments in projects that could help small entrepreneurs in developing countries, venture capitalists continue to seek the latest technological opportunities, even though many of them fail. Fifth, institutional capital exists in the form of civil society groups, national governments, and the United Nations and its agencies. These bodies are capable of supporting design interventions but until now relatively few efforts have been made to enlist them as partners in design projects for social need. Governments have been diverted instead by designers who push for federally funded design councils to enhance market performance rather than provide social services.

These difficulties notwithstanding, some designers do use one or several of the five capitals to launch successful social projects. I can cite, for example, the Japanese architect Shigeru Ban who has built hundreds of structures out of cardboard tubes that might otherwise have ended up in a landfill. His projects include a temporary village for the population displaced by the 1995 earthquake in Kobe, Japan and the Japanese pavilion at the Hanover Expo 2000. Ban has served as an advisor to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, which has used his designs as temporary shelters for people in Rwanda, Turkey, and Mexico whose homes were ravaged by war, earthquakes, and floods. I can also mention Dean Kamen, inventor of the Ibot Transporter - a six-wheeled robotic "mobility system"

⁴ A noteworthy exception is ApproTEC, a nonprofit business that develops and sells inexpensive technologies such as irrigation pumps to small -scale subsistence farmers in Africa. ApproTEC recently received a generous grant from the Skoll Foundation, which was established by Jeffrey Skoll, a founder of eBay.

that can climb stairs, traverse rough terrains, and enable its user to assume a vertical position to meet a standing person at eye-level. In both cases, the designers were able to find partners to help them realize their projects.⁵ Ban drew on the UN High Commission's existing budget to resettle refugees, while Kamen worked through his own privately held development corporation and raised some of the required funds from outside investors. In each instance, the designer engaged in a rhetorical process to convince partners to join his projects. This represents the application of a designer's human capital to a social situation, where the designer produced a successful intervention that satisfied his own social concerns and met the expectations of his partners. What made the projects easier was that the need for interventions in those particular situations was easily recognized. The provision of temporary shelter is a central problem for the UN High Commission for Refugees. Similarly the design of a more mobile and user-friendly motorized vehicle for the disabled has been on the social agenda of disabled people for many years. In each case, the designer's human capital, which was joined with his ability to attract the necessary social, physical, financial, and institutional capital, insured the project's success.

I am impressed with these examples but I am also concerned that each depended almost entirely on the human capital of a single individual. As another option for social intervention, I want to present two projects in which social capital is the primary component. While designers did not initiate either of these endeavors, both made use of design for their efficacy. The first project, MoveOn.org, exemplifies how design can be used to generate social capital for political ends. Two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, who were frustrated with the Clinton impeachment proceedings and wanted to get beyond them to address the country's needs, started it in 1998. After 9/11, they joined with another organization that was calling for a peaceful response to the cycle of violence and then emerged as a vocal anti-war group in the months before the United States attacked Iraq. With only a handful of organizers, it helped to mobilize the participation of more than 2 million people for demonstrations that took place in the United States and other parts of the world. After the initial attacks on Iraq, MoveOn.org began to change into a broad political action coalition that was held together by e-mail communication. The group chose to focus on specific legislation and issues confronting members of the United States Congress, along with other events such as the recall of Governor Gray Davis in California, which the organization opposed. Rather than send scattershot alarms to their two million subscribers, the handful of MoveOn organizers devised a system to alert them to particular issues and provide an easy way for them to respond. Subscribers need only click on an icon to sign a petition. These petitions are then delivered to members of Congress, sometimes with more than 200,000 signatures, as signs of citizen will and they have already had a strong influence on individual pieces of legislation. Mailings to subscribers are targeted by zip code so that when a telephone campaign is called for, recipients receive the names and phone numbers of their own congressional representatives, whom they are asked to contact about specific votes. In addition, the organization raises money for print and television advertising to address particular issues and sends out information bulletins that include relevant excerpts of articles from the world's press. With only a few staff members,

⁵ Ban's and Kamen's work is discussed briefly in a special issue of *I.D.: The International Design Magazine* devoted to socially conscious design. See *I.D.* (February 2001): 63, 81. The Ibot is also featured in the Massive Change exhibition organized by Bruce Mau and the Institute without Boundaries.

MoveOn.org has successfully harnessed the power of the Internet to build social capital. They used design in two senses: first, to conceptualize a social process and second, to produce the web tools to make it happen. In the 2006 American congressional elections, MoveOn.org mobilized voters for Democratic Party candidates in many state elections. The overwhelming victory of the Democrats was due in part to MoveOn's efforts.⁶

The second project I will discuss is also one that emphasizes the design of a process rather than a material product. The Working Bikes Cooperative was founded in 2001.⁷ The WBC collects used bikes in the Chicago area, repairs them, and then sells some of them to earn money to ship the rest in large containers to partner organizations in Africa. These organizations include a women's group in western Kenya and a community center in Patriense, Ghana. In Patriense, the bicycles have been incorporated into a multi-purpose program that involves training people in bicycle repair as a way to earn money, adapting some bicycles as load-carrying vehicles for micro-enterprises, and loaning bicycles to local government officials who need transportation to perform their duties. The Working Bikes Cooperative is animated by volunteer labor as well as several paid people who run the large storage facility, supervise the volunteers, manage local sales, and handle the overseas shipping. The project creates new uses for old bicycles through a social network that generates sufficient financial capital to sustain itself.

A strategy for the future

To expand the focus of design to embrace social needs means revising one's understanding of the designer's role and potential in the world. This is a precarious enterprise. Those who already live comfortably are easily lulled into complacency by a new Palm Pilot or a restaurant that fuses Chinese and Indian cuisine. And yet to turn the world in a different direction requires a heroic effort. To motivate our participation in this effort, the picture of a world in need must become part of our innermost being.

Designers have to enter civil society in full force and aggressively seek partners who share their desire to heal the world. Among the thousands of civil society organizations are many that might welcome their collaboration. To lead the way, I would call on the local, national, and international design organizations to initiate such efforts. Building social capital is an essential strategy. To move this process forward, we need easily accessible compendia of best practices, which are organized according to specific topics. Presenting these in accessible public spaces such as websites can not only provide designers with ideas but also show potential partners what designers can do. We also need more discourse - more writing, lectures, conferences, and discussions that can generate a groundswell of concern for new modes of social practice. Now that civil society has become a political force, there is no need to wait for governments to take the lead. Civil society can set its own agenda. The struggle to replace a politics of power with a politics of principle will be long and difficult. The declarations of human needs have been clearly articulated and largely agreed upon by the nations of the world. The challenge before us all is marshalling the will to satisfy them.

⁶ See the website www.MoveOn.org

⁷ See the cooperative's website www.workingbikes.org.

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