

Reframing the status quo in design education: it's not a rehearsal

Review Essay

Steve Keirl, Reader in Design Education,
Goldsmiths, University of London

Resnick, E., (2016), *Developing Citizen Designers*. New York/London, Bloomsbury Academic
ISBN 978-0-8578-5620-3 (Paperback)
312pp 253 colour illustrations
Publishers price at time of review: Paperback/EPUB eBook/PDF eBook £26.99. Hardback
£108.00.

Reviewer's note: In this review, any reference appearing as a number alone, for example (227), refers to the page number in Developing Citizen Designers. All other references are Harvard in-text system with full listing at the end.

Developing Citizen Designers offers an engaging range of writing and illustrative work, stimulus quotations, discussion and a spectrum of the theoretical and the practical in and for design education in general and graphic design education in particular. Following its Foreword, Introduction, and Introductory essay, it is structured in three parts:

1. *Design Thinking* with sub-sections on Socially responsible design, Design activism, and Design authorship;
2. *Design Methodology* with sub-sections on Collaborative learning, Participatory design, and Service design; and,
3. *Making a Difference* with sub-sections on Getting involved and Resources.

The six sub-sections in Parts One and Two share a common framing each having an opening essay; an interview with a respected designer or design educator; and, a set of up to eight case studies. Part Three's two sub-sections together comprise eight essays; one interview; a rather brief resources list; and a reasonable bibliography. Across the sixty-seven contributions, there is a reasonable smorgasbord of offerings to engage students, educators and designers alike. Equally, the same players would no doubt offer their personal criticisms and will have wanted more of one aspect than another – but what else would we reasonably expect from the field of design? Whilst all the contributions might be considered short (at never more than a few pages each), they all have the potential to open up issues, show practices and, importantly, offer stimulus for critique and debate. Given the book's title, we would surely look for nothing less.

Resnick has done well to assemble this collection although it's a curiosity that the impression is given that she is the book's author rather than the editor of an anthology – not least as she is the author of just two of the sixty-seven entries. That said, the conception and intentions of the book are sound enough and the title is generally well addressed by the contributors. Given the global reach of the issues that the book engages, we can be disappointed at its geo-political grounding being, as it is, largely populated by US contributors with many others from Europe. While these are still rather early days for us to talk of a global design education/practice phenomenon we do know – as the book eventually shows – that the reach of consequences from dominant Western-minority world design practices is indeed global.

Developing Citizen Designers has a distinctive graphic design positioning but mitigating this there are enough counterpoints and suggestions to remind the reader that alternatives matter. It soon becomes

clear that most contributors recognise that graphic design cannot continue its poorest practices of the past in any form. In fact, the book works to show the kinds of new direction on offer to the field and the necessity of it maintaining its critical and holistic perspective. For example, in one of the book's practitioner interviews, Vulpinari, noting the abundance of online sites, agencies, and ready-made graphics templates and packages, says:

My advice to a student studying graphic design would be to consider changing program if it's strictly designated to "Graphic design"!...Communication designers need to quickly climb the decisional ladder and get into the strategy-defining circle where they can practice an integrated approach of strategy and creativity, across channels and disciplines. (23)

Whilst this is a reference to interdisciplinarity taking graphic design well beyond of its traditional patch, another increasingly practised school of thought presents itself – that of the inter-disciplinary potential (if not role and duty) of the encompassing field of design in general. Increasingly, leading (critical and post-disciplinary) higher education design centres resist any valorisation of either 'design disciplines' such as graphic design as they might sit under a design umbrella or, equally, they see design practice in its cross-disciplinary stance as engaging all fields of human endeavour. As Boylston notes, designers worldwide who are positioning themselves as global activists are doing so on a forty-year emergence of such fields as design for social impact, design for public interest, design for sustainability, design for social innovation and so on – fields that, he suggests, '...are earnestly redesigning design.' (294).

The book is weakened for the reader who is hoping (as is suggested in several places) to find any solid educational theory or philosophy to underpin the good practices that it espouses. Pedagogy is oft-mentioned but only in near-lay terms and, at best, in well-meaning talk of teaching-as-generally-understood with terms like assessment, aims, and collaborative learning being rather uncritically used. For a welcome theoretical input, social constructivism makes a worthy appearance and does so in both a valid and valuable way for what it signifies. Elsewhere, as with pedagogy, *literacy* is underplayed when Myra Margolin writes of *Teaching Social Literacy* as '...teach(ing) social design students basic frameworks for "reading" the social world and understanding social issues and social problems.' (276). This, to a critical literacy theorist, would not be enough; residing as it suggests, in only the technical-practical realms of literacy. Nonetheless, she offers a stance echoing critical theory when she advocates transformative interventions through socially aware design practices.

A transformative intervention has the explicit intent to create a fundamental shift in power dynamics. It reallocates resources or shifts the control that a particular group has over significant decisions impacting their lives. One cannot create transformation without shifting power. (277)

The arguments for collaborative approaches in the book are unsurprisingly greater than those connected just with learning. I say 'unsurprisingly' not only because of the book's title and mission but especially because collaboration-as-antithesis-to-competition offers clues to so many designerly strategies that can be adopted to support cooperative ventures, democratic design and design democracy, participatory design and participatory democracy and so on. Resisting competition and any 'race to get ahead' resonates with Armstrong's approach in her essay on *Social innovation through participatory design* (190) where she celebrates hierarchy-breaking practices that can come from designer-user collaborations. She points to the process-oriented participatory design initiatives that emerged in 1970s Scandinavia involving workers, unions, academics and political activists and, introducing the Participatory Design section of the book, notes how 'Design becomes not just a single creative act but a continuing dialogue.' (191). Here the parallels of participatory democracy and participatory design become apparent – they similarly resist hierarchy, power imbalance, marginalisation, and monocultural thinking.

It is impossible to do justice here to the forty-two case studies presented in the book. They are all articulate (though some are rather lacking in deep theoretical underpinning) and collectively well-

supported by the book's 250-plus colour images. They too, have a guiding structure as a consistency-device. This risks the charge of being formulaic but they are not overly constrained by it. The collection and their groupings can be criticised positively and negatively for what they offer. Some are pedagogically strong, some designerly so. A couple really made me want to challenge their inclusion but that's a reviewer's lot and belongs to another forum. As ever, what matters is how those using the book engage with it. An uncritical read will offer little stimulus. However, whether student, design educator or designer, the spectrum offers much. If, as an example of poor practice, a design educator were to simply 'take' a project from the book and apply it to their setting they would probably offer a poor educational experience as well as fail to advance the book's intentions. Taking a different pedagogical tack, there is such a qualitative variety in the case studies that collectively there is not only huge potential for comparative design studies amongst them but, also, they represent excellent source material for sensitive yet difficult ethical debate.

The case study range of topics is wide. A sample of the forty-two includes: designs for democracy and engagement with elections; projects on sexuality, sexual health and wellbeing; homelessness; food production and care including entomophagy (insect eating); school branding; domestic violence on male victims; neighbourhood environmental engagements; substance misuse; dementia support; and, a women's museum.

All of the assignment-based case studies anticipate communication in some form. As Resnick says in her introduction the studies were written by: '...an engaged group of design educators who directly address the notion that design, and design education, can illuminate a pathway to effect positive change within a social agenda.' (13). This brings us to the point that 'communication' takes many guises and that, today more than ever, communications purposes and methods must be closely scrutinised. Writing sixty years ago, Vance Packard presented his book *The Hidden Persuaders* as:

...an attempt to explore a strange and rather exotic new area of modern life. It is about the way many of us are being influenced and manipulated – far more than we realize – in the patterns of our everyday lives. Large-scale efforts are being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing decisions, and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry and the social sciences. Typically, these efforts take place beneath our level of awareness; so that the appeals which move us are often, in a sense, "hidden". (Packard, 1957/1962:11)

Arguably, little has changed in sixty years. Today, much is seen to up for grabs in the arena of citizenship behaviours with concerns about the levels and quality of information available to voters and consumers, about 'fake news' and about the used and abuses to which the internet and so-called 'social' media are put. Mis- and dis-information go back much further than the post-war consumerist boom yet today, as Canniffe in his foreword to the text notes: 'People have lost faith in governments, and politicians have lost their way. Every day we are reminded that politicians are either incapable or unwilling to meet these global challenges, don't understand the relationship of local to global, and appear to only serve the needs of the few.' (8). Put otherwise, democracy (or ethical politics) is under remarkable strain as it heads towards 2020.

To this end, Ilyin's essay *What design activism is and is not: a primer for students* talks of design activists who '...work for people who do not have access to the design tools, strategic thinking, or knowledge of communication systems they need to advocate for themselves or their causes'. She positions 'design activists as propagandists' and offers the notion of 'activist as sleuth' and cautions that: 'It is impossible to become a design activist without finding yourself in many conversations about ethical choices.' (64-65). Such enlightened approaches do show up in several of the case studies, for example when students are sleuths/researchers and, significantly, when they are having to sensitively and ethically address issues that warrant change.

It could be said that the collection of cases remains grounded in the local but this would be unfair. In that they are invariably locally positioned, the whole point of this kind of educational approach is to

contribute to students' capacities to empathise as well as to maintain a critique that is globally oriented. If truly global issues of exploitative capitalism, climate change, perpetual war, and famine and water shortages are to be addressed then studied and principled strategies are needed. Some would say that we can only tinker at the edges of the neo-liberal agenda of coarse capitalism while others would argue for complete re-design on many fronts - not least the political, ethical, social, and psychological. Fry (2011) for example would argue for rethought, re-designed institutionalised notions of such concepts as 'sustainability' and 'democracy'. As he has said: 'We do not feel our unsustainability beyond occasional touches of guilt as we fill up our car's tank, look at the contents of our supermarket trolley or check-in at the airport... Certainly, few of us feel the tyranny of our human centredness.' (Fry, 2009:247)

For sure, ethical discourses can be difficult and cause much inner reflection but there are plentiful sources of encouragement and inspiration. For example, towards the end of his book, David Berman (also a graphic designer and Ethics Chair for graphic design in Canada) discusses the question: "What can one professional do?" (Berman, 2009:156-7) and he says: 'Together, it is up to us to decide what role our profession will play. Is it going to be about selling sugar water and smoke and mirrors to the vulnerable child within every one of us... or helping to repair the world?' He urges that designers 'choose well' and 'don't just do good design, do good'. Meanwhile, on the challenges of personal efficacy and how to act ethically in times seemingly dominated by self-interest or corporate greed, the work of Peter Singer is strongly supportive. Amongst his extensive literature, his thesis of the best form of self interest being that of looking after the interests of others is presented in Singer (1995).

Victor Papanek's opening words from his 1971 text *Design for the Real World* are well known to critical design educators:

There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them. And possibly only one profession is phonier. Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care, is probably the phoniest field in existence today. (Papanek, 1971/1974:9)

The stance resonates in the contributions of several of this book's authors, and one of the interviewed designers, Jacques Lange, was deeply impressed by it as a student:

This statement has haunted me throughout my career – I asked myself if I am one of these 'phonies'? My answer has always been the same: "I need to do more to break this cycle." Yes it is my belief that social and ethical responsibilities should be at the center of what designers do. (142)

Heller & Vienne (2003) dedicate their edited collection *Citizen Designer: Perspectives on design responsibility* to Milton Glaser and, in the book's introduction, Steven Heller attributes to Glaser the statement: "Good design is good citizenship". Heller goes on:

But does this mean making good design is an indispensable obligation to the society and culture in which designers are citizens? Or does it suggest that design has inherent properties that when applied in a responsible manner contribute to a well-being that enhances everyone's life as a citizen? (Heller, 2003:9).

Resnick's makes use of this quotation in her introduction in order to engage with the question 'What is design citizenship?' when she sets out her motives and agenda for the collection. She notes the need to get beyond current design orthodoxies of preoccupations with aesthetics, styles and trends and to act with social and moral responsibility to articulate a necessary change in both design education and in professional design practice.

We are all designers and consumers, citizens and users, creators and (after another of Packard's works) waste-makers. Our species (in fact, the wealthy minority of it) is responsible for a history that has now shown itself to be unsustainable. Does this mean we are committed to perpetuating the same? Most of us would not only hope not and would want actively to work to reverse the situation that corrodes the planet, lives, communities, environments and democracy alike. This would imply activism whether in our daily or professional lives but for many it is also about the notion of changing behaviours. Certainly, graphic design for its part is all of: persuader, communicator, propaganda, and profession. As Victor Margolin says in the book's introductory essay: 'Promoting behavioral change has...become one of the greatest tasks of the graphic designer' (15).

But is this a strong enough perspective? Arguably not. Critical theoretical stances are key to the necessary change too. For example, authors such as Fry would reject the very notion of 'sustainable design'. Whether as propaganda tool, public health educator or product 'pusher', much graphic design output has to be understood as both messenger and message in relation to whatever content it seeks to advance. Graphic design enjoys a contextual temporality in that it is both contemporary to the moment and the issue engaged as well as being temporary in its purposeful existence. Much the same can be said for any design practice although some have better chances of (en)durability than others. Design and designers may claim to be apart-from the message/products/propaganda (or any other creation) they bring into being but they are nonetheless culpable. As Fry says: 'What design brings into being not only influences the nature of the world we human beings inhabit but equally affects what we become as actors within that world as its makers and un-makers' (Fry, 2011:38). Designers' and design educators' roles in the bigger drama are re-envisioned when the likes of Fry see design as key to political action – when design and politics each inform the other in acting on and for the future. In his 2009 text he speaks of the need for '...displacing the 'design community' tendency to reduce design to the process, product and expression of a professional practice...' (Fry, 2009:14) but he also urges that:

It is also important to grasp that like no other critical moment before, there are going to be unprecedented opportunities in coming decades as the world of human habitation is transformed. This is the opportunity of crisis. However, it is always ambiguous. Loss and breakdown will certainly occur and the new will come at a price, but what is certain is that design transformed will have a central role to play in the creation of any futuring process.' (Fry, 2011:xi)

I have noted that *Developing Citizen Designers* has a distinct Western lean to its content. This is an important concern when today nothing is spared from global interconnectivity nor should be spared from global scrutiny. If designers are to have a personal values framework that is 'responsible' in all the senses espoused in the text and are to situate themselves in some kind of empathetic ethic then global disposition must be a part of their consideration and their being. It is thus a welcome counterpoint in the book when first nations are cited or a report from Africa appears. However, rather than see such observations as a criticism of the book, we can reflect on the extent to which design – at least in the Western, minority-world, consumer-driven context – must carry a huge burden of responsibility (if not guilt) towards the monster that has been created. To pull back from the excesses that do not constitute ethical design is a major challenge for the Academy and for design professions alike. Clearly, Resnick and many of her contributors are onto this challenge but the circumstances of today demand a strong drive from all of us engaged in design education and design practice. It is here that quality Design and Technology education plays its powerful double role – in enhancing the general education of all students which in turn seeks to nurture appropriate values frameworks in those students who would become the new design professionals.

In his essay *Anatomy of the socially responsible designer*, Shea importantly reminds us that: 'Not all designers have a clear understanding of their personal ethics...(h)owever, socially responsible designers know what values drive them' (20). This draws attention to how we can be victims of our own education if that education (and the social milieu of which it is a part) has been a largely uncritical one. There is no design that is not contestable nor is there any design that is anything more

(or less) than a bundle of competing values – whether they be values designed into the design by the designer or values attributed post-design by the user-engager of/with that design.

And we are to be ever-cautioned by Ihde's (2006) Designer Fallacy, namely, to remember that whatever the designer's intentions, it is a fallacy to assume that the final design, once in the public or user's realm, will be used as intended. This is a caution that can temper designer arrogance and nurture a responsible humility in designers. Thus, on a note of designer humility and sensitivity, Jancer and Weinstein call for:

...a holistic understanding of a situation, (where) citizen designers can facilitate solutions by synthesizing ideas from key stakeholders and celebrating them. The true value of design is not about personal ideas or credit, but rather about empowering the voice of others and sewing together ideas that might never have synergized without the direction and commitment of someone looking at the whole system of complex, delicately interconnected parts. (289)

If the human-designerly dispositions of all people are to harmonise with an emergent class of empathetic design professionals then a consciousness is needed towards all four of our 'realms of co-existence': *other humans*; *other species*; *the planet*; and, *technologies*. (Keirl, 2010). In parallel, the choice-making capacities and power of citizens everywhere need nurturing and educating to maintain the kinds of democratic participation and critique so keenly needed for enabling better futures. However, we should ever-remember that such languaging and configuring does not remain in the dominant Western mould.

To this end, the emergence of design anthropology in some higher education institutions has spawned new understandings, new research opportunities and new critiques of design theory and practice. Not least, this is a field that engages ethically with majority world and aboriginal peoples and brings to the attention of the Western, culturally-limited stance richer perspectives on both self and 'the Other'. Tunstall moves beyond the necessary considerations of professional and social 'responsibility' for the designer alerting her students to the problematics of 'cultural responsibility'. 'Culture demands respect, not responsibility, which sometimes means stopping the design process where it might be considered disrespectful' (278). She presents a strong critique of how dominant (e.g Euro-American) ways of being in the world work to colonise innovation by creating a 'design industry' around notions such as social responsibility. Articulating many potent methods and processes, she draws into her cogent essay Scandinavian cooperative design methodology, respectful dialogue that fully engages all who might contribute to design development, ways of working to 'shift hegemonic values systems', and... '...(the) creation of conditions of compassion among the participants in the project and in harmony with their wider environments.' (279-280).

Buck-Coleman's essay discusses *Assessment considerations for social impact design* (note here that this is not *educational* assessment) and she cautions against unrealistic ideas of fixing major problems and issues via any single design. 'Although it is highly unlikely a design project can single-handedly untangle a complex problem, social impact design can contribute to minimizing and redirecting negative effects. With this, we need to replace the overstating verbs we have been using, such as "solve" and "eliminate", with more pliable ones, such as "contribute", "support", "minimize", and build".' (285). Such critique has been witnessed over the years in Design and Technology's pedagogical discussions around the qualitative differences amongst framing terms such as 'task', 'challenge', 'brief', and 'problem' when used in the classroom. Such nuances are key to, not apart from, the qualitative change that is sought for *Developing Citizen Designers*.

This collection amounts to neither a revolutionary manifesto nor a recipe for ready-made success. It recognises an enormous task and that, whilst the whole burden cannot be shouldered by designers and design educators, they have a moral and political responsibility to engage with and act on the task. It is honest enough in recognising that incremental local change can work, that its need is urgent, but that there is no guarantee of overnight success. As Buck-Coleman puts it: 'Climate change. Poverty. Water shortages. Drug trafficking. AIDS epidemic. Social injustice. These and other wicked problems

were years in the making, and we cannot realistically expect one design problem to “solve” them. However, thoughtful, well-executed design projects can make a difference. We just need data to support it.’ (286).

And here the flag of research is hoist. Design academics do their part in maintaining the status quo when they don’t act to document the impact of their efforts – whether as designers or as educators. Our field is a poor research performer in the Academy and it cannot grumble about lack of recognition or respect if it cannot demonstrate what it can achieve. For those with interests in both research impact and design impact (is there a difference?) the book also offers clues for research ‘capture’ opportunities and challenges. Jancer and Weinstein caution us to engage in meaningful ways with all stakeholders in any design project they say, if the designers’ ideas perpetuate ‘...a hierarchy of solution-making and values’ then there is an implication (or presumption) that ‘...people don’t know what they want or need for themselves: this is a dangerous attitude to have in making social change.’ They go on:

Operating with such considerations poses a risk of neo-colonialism in practice. Despite seemingly beneficial outcomes, negative impacts at the communities’ expense often result as well. Social change focussed designs that exclude a community’s culture, norms, or values essentially serve to erase community and replace it with a “neocolony” of the creator. These negative impacts are why neo-colonialism is a force for change that is fundamentally imposing rather than empowering. (288).

If creeping and pernicious neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism are to be resisted and dissolved then, as Canniffe argues, there is a need for ‘...a new breed of educator, designer and student. This new breed of designer is a mix of community builder, designer, entrepreneur, and activist.’ (8-9). Resnick argues from the outset that:

As the fabric of our societies and cultures continues to unravel at an accelerated rate, there is both a compelling and crucial need for an unmitigated transformation of design education as we know it – design educators urgently need to revisit our ingrained methods and philosophies in order to review and reconsider how we will actually “steward” our future generations of young design practitioners.’ (12).

Design educators in schools may be able to avoid some of the historical pitfalls addressed in this book by learning from it and by reflecting on the embedded practices that have, over the past fifty to sixty years, become the norm of a design profession in need of radical revisioning. This is the unsustainable status quo within the profession that has contributed to the status quo in the world at large. To close, I am grateful to have drawn this essay’s title from a line from Steven McCarthy’s introduction to the Design Authorship section of the book: ‘...an education in design should not merely be a dress rehearsal for the status quo.’ (110).

References

Berman, D.B., (2009), *do good design: How designers can change the world*, New Riders-AIGA, Berkeley, CA.

Fry, T., (2009), *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics and New Practice*, Berg, Oxford.

Fry, T., (2011), *Design as Politics*, Berg, Oxford.

Heller, S. & Vienne, V., (Eds.), (2003), *Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility*, Allworth Press, NY.

Ihde, D., (2006), 'The Designer Fallacy and Technological Imagination' in (Ed.) Dakers, J.R., (2006), *Defining Technological Literacy: Towards an epistemological framework*, pp 121-131, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Keirl, S., (2010), 'Critiquing and Designing as Thinking Tools for Technology Education for Sustainable Co-existence' in Hansen, R. & Petrina, S. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Technological Learning and Thinking: Culture, Design, Sustainability, Human Ingenuity Conference*, pp 531-540, Vancouver, BC, 17-19 June, 2010.

Packard, V., (1957/1962), *The Hidden Persuaders*, Pelican, Harmondsworth.

Papanek, V., (1971/1974), *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, Paladin, St. Albans.

Singer, P., (1995), *How are we to live? Ethics in an age of self-interest*, Mandarin, Port Melbourne.