Acknowledging Participation:
Role of Systemic Thinking in Design Justice for promoting participation

Collaborative Unit
Individual Reflective Essay

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Introduction

The need to implement design thinking solutions at various levels of policy making has been rising over the past many decades creating the need for designers to question their role & methodologies when it comes to tackling agendas that are dramatically variable and sensitive. (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2000) This reflective essay aims at discussing scenarios where the involvement of design hasn't particularly delivered a positive impact and how it can be tackled by using systemic thinking for social change.

1. The role of design in participation

Design is often called upon by organisations and authorities to tackle their identified briefs. (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2000) The traditional role thus is of consulting these clients in order to meet their needs with their end user. (David Peter Stroh, 2015) In this process of reaching the client's user, designers often conduct primary research which is focused on the brief assigned. (Nold, 2021) In their conversations they can come across larger issues but they have to act appropriately- concerning the client and the time in hand which often doesn't end up suiting the justice they want to do for their client's user who are people. (Grimaldi, Fokkinga and Ocnarescu, 2013)

1.1 Design Consultation and Conventional methodologies

Conventional thinking has led us to tackle complex issues by imposing short term solutions which often end up creating long term structural problems. (David Peter Stroh, 2015) The purely anxious need to solve a problem of emotional category in a given amount of time is the main reason behind delivering "designed" solutions which are non-functional and in many cases laying foundation for a concept called consultation fatigue. (David Peter Stroh, 2015) The overall scenario created is one of wide spread acceptance of design injustice laying foundation for the question of whether or not design methodologies can tackle complex societal issues is looming at large and can only be answered by breaking down the role of designers and the processes they rely on. (Meadows, 2008)

The Collaborative Unit at MA Service Design allowed us to explore a similar regime in the London Borough of Newham, where it was discovered that the primary role of service designers is to consult local authorities or organisations to identify the motivations and their parallels to increase local participation for social action. Right at the beginning we were handed over a project brief that was based on quality information collected over few decades of hard work. In the course of this project the team constructed an asset map and were able to identify an exponential number of efforts that the council has initiated to help the citizens resolve their issues. The brief however was to promote participation. According to Peter Stroh's model of Social Change the stage handed over to us was Stage1- Building Foundation for change or readiness. (Figure 1, Stroh 2015)

1.2 Types of Participation- Generalising Information

Participation at the level of solving issues like homelessnesses; food, income and energy poverty; unemployment; etc is in itself a task for both- impacted residents and the concerned bodies. (David Peter Stroh, 2015) The agenda revolves around the essence of readiness of the parties to come together and with existing yet unused solutions available in the surroundings the question really was one based on the past experiences and relation of trust between the two. Over the course of our primary information collection process we realised that lack of quality execution has triggered a rather counter intuitive thought process towards trusting the "designed-solutions" that authorities plan for the residents for numerous reasons like- generalising information. An example of which was clearly seen in an abandoned public gym right in middle of a park. Having conversations with both ends- the people and the council we realised that over a participatory activity, the council and participants concluded that the people want a public gym in contrast to the hi-tech gym constructed in the Council Leisure Centre. Banking on a few hours worth of discussion, money was spent on a public gym. The abandoned nature of it explains the people's opinion and council cites the people's voices for demanding the same. A conflict of blame triggered by conventional methods of solution delivery, easiest settled on design thinking. (David Peter Stroh, 2015)

1.3 Consultation Fatigue & Design Injustice- a question

In a paradigm where well intentioned suggestions lead to conflicts a stir is created to question the very essence of design thinking techniques. (Brown and Wyatt, 2010) In a versatile and radically variable modern world, a question is raised on the conventional methodologies and their implications of consultation fatigue generated by design solutions that do not do justice to the end users. (David Peter Stroh, 2015)

2. Role of Systemic Thinking

The very aim of resorting to design thinking is to meet the desired mission and vision of the client. This presents designers with two scenarios- Where we are and; Where we want to be. Peter Stroh presents this in his model- Four Stages of Leading System Change (figure1 Stroh, 2015) It discusses the stages from building readiness; understanding and accepting realities; making decisions and; bridging the gaps. This model gives a holistic picture of the entire 'system' at hand and the relationship between the stakeholders.

2.1 Systems- Give & take relationship

"A system is the result of *interaction* between *interconnected elements* resulting in a *function* based on their *purpose*." (Meadows, 2008) The four elements of a system according to scientist and writer Donella H. Meadows, always work in creating a loop of cause and effect relationship. This means that movement, positive or negative, of any of the elements results in an impact on the other elements of the system. In service design methodologies these elements can be identified as stakeholders that influence the positive and negative impacts on each other. (Meadows, 2008)

2.2 System Traps & opportunities

Using this tool of identifying systems, the team was able to gather a holistic view of the situation in Newham built upon smaller loops of stakeholders identified in the project. When viewed under the lens of value proposition- a tool of service design, this loop can help identify problems and opportunities. The narrative around people's well being came out as a result of identifying a designer's role and also the nature of relation between the client and their users. Owing to the diverse ethnicity of the area explored during the project, it was very difficult to stay on course with discussions that viewed the whole system while there were issues that could be tapped into like language barriers, cultural and generation gaps, etc that restricted people from participating. The overview of the system however presented the team with the opportunity of identifying a contrasting relationship of the council with different kind of groups based on their reasons and levels of motivation for indulgence with initiatives already in place.

One of the organisations studied in the system was the Community Health Champions COVID 19- A team of people from middle to old age who devoted their personal time to help the organisation tackle the issue of COVID 19 during the outbreak based on their personal motivations. Viewing this structure in Stroh's model- Four Stages of Leading System shows that the readiness (Stage 1) is created on the grounds of personal motivations. The contrast to people who do not indulge in activities came from our conversations with people on the streets in the Borough of Newham. The readiness or motivation of people was not really triggered and on the contrary in most cases was being directly impacted by past experiences of seeking help from council operated organisations. This to an extent that a conversation with one of the staff members at the Council Library revealed that wearing her identity card in the public felt like a threat to her as some people have even started seeing the representation of the council as their adversaries.

2.3 Acknowledging Natural Enablers- Participation

The social ethos of the borough created by its citizens presents a unique model of participation. The nature of issues addressed by the authorities is significantly similar to the issues that people are solving for each other. The difference however is the method of approaching. An insight gathered during primary research guided the team towards understanding the concept of "*intimate groups*- The implications of social and experience based disbelief in the system has led the residents to communicate and seek help within their close groups of family and friends." An insight that allowed the project to build itself around the motivations and actions of people that go unnoticed. In conversation with a female student immigrant from Bangladesh, the team conferred that she was aiding a friend who is struggling to find accomodation in the area. Even though the council's reform of helping students find accommodations or seek mental well-being help exists, it is not being directly utilised. Rather the same is being conducted in its own natural way, which is not recognised. The council's narrative of language barriers is one of the elements that is pushing the motivation to participate downwards as it is forcing them follow a method of resorting the issue while they can seek resolution from someone they closely interact with.

Seen in the solution proposed by the team, if the council sees this trap as an area of opportunity which can be done by acknowledging this indirect loop of participation formed among the residents. It will motivate them to stick together and also motivate others to take similar action.

Conclusion

The current narrative of design injustice is a deepening concept that is triggered by conflict among client and users transferring the blame on design thinking as the solutions rendered by conventional methods are not fit for the modern complexities. This issue however can be tackled by assuming a rather systemic approach of identifying the relationship between existing factors and stakeholders that can allow service designers to tackle the issue of design justice in the scope of enabling or motivating participation.

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Appendices

(Figure 1, Stroh 2015) Building Foundation for change or readiness.