

Reflections on *Design Activism and Social Change*,  
Design History Society Annual Conference, September 7-10, 2011, Barcelona

After a summer of political unrest, from the Middle East to London, the 34<sup>th</sup> Design History Society annual conference, *Design Activism and Social Change*, provided a timely forum for considering the role of design in a world under duress. Convenor Guy Julier's three-day conference featured 100 papers by speakers from 30 countries and was hosted by the Universitat de Barcelona and the ADI-FAD, an industrial design association founded in 1903. The Catalanian city of Barcelona provided a suitable location for a conference on activism: soon after the conference, the news media reported that Catalonia had banned bullfighting on animal welfare grounds and to further distinguish the region from Spain.

For this delegate, the conference prompted reflection on the relationship between design activism and design reform. Activism is defined as "the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change," following Rudolf Eucken's proposition that "truth is arrived at through action"; meanwhile, reform is "the action or process of making changes in an institution, organization, or aspect of social or political life, so as to remove errors, abuses, or other hindrances to proper performance."<sup>1</sup> Is design activism, therefore, simply the new, fashionable, term for what used to be called design reform? If so, it has a history as long as that of industrialization.<sup>2</sup> Nineteenth-century design reformers argued for design as a social salve. What William Morris aimed to achieve with embroidery, among other things, Buckminster Fuller sought through engineering; whatever the medium or the material, each was engaged in design reform.

Julier's conference certainly took this long view. In a panel I chaired, titled "Modernity and Social Agency," Daniela Prina examined the work of Belgian design reformer Charles Buls (1837-1914) and thereby provided a historical precedent for the assertion by opening keynote speaker Henk Oosterling that the medium of design activism is public space. Helena Chance showed, in her analysis of the leisure spaces provided by 19<sup>th</sup>-century reforming factory owners to increase employees' productivity, that privately owned space, too, can have an educative function. Monica Cruz Guaqueta considered designer Charlotte Perriand's activism with the Association for Revolutionary Artists and Designers in the context of mid-1930s Parisian unrest.

But what if we seek divergence rather than continuity? How do design activism and design reform differ? Fuad-Luke moves design activism away from design reform when he defines it as "design thinking, imagination, and practice applied knowingly or unknowingly to create a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental and/or economic change"; he suggests, moreover, that design activism, in addition to achieving social change, can change the activists themselves.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on counter-narrative is important because Fuad-Luke, along with *Design Futuring* author Tony Fry, is critical of design history's complicity in reinforcing canonical and aesthetic approaches to design and its histories. Whether we agree with their characterizations, their exhortations to accountable, engaged, and self-reflexive design histories are salutary.<sup>4</sup>

Oosterling's keynote provided an unwitting clue to the divergence of design activism and design reform. In showcasing projects in which designers achieved change from within existing power structures, he implicitly raised questions about

class and social inequality that remained unanswered. To judge by the examples he discussed, design activism is something performed by one (educated, socially-progressive, middle-class) group on behalf of another (less well-educated, lower-class) group — a perspective that begs the question: How radical is *that*? How *activist* is that? Is design activism something that can be done *for others*, or must it be something that people do *for themselves*? A potential distinction thus emerges between the related and, arguably, often interdependent processes of design reform as a top-down initiative and design activism as a grass-roots activity. The projects Oosterling presented are better described using the old-fashioned term, “design reform,” than the contemporary buzzword, “design activism.”

However, some scruples about the politics of design activism did emerge in a keynote conversation between Ken Garland and Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFares. Garland vividly described his disappointed realization that the posters he had created for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament’s Aldermaston marches had totalitarian overtones when carried by large numbers of protesters. Garland also displayed his political sensitivity in his closing point that, today, “everyone” is a designer and therefore a potential design activist.

While Oosterling pointed out that the medium of design activism is public space and publicity, Fuad-Luke argues that “design’s ability to operate through ‘things’ and ‘systems’” makes it particularly suitable for dealing with contemporary societal, economic, and environmental issues.”<sup>5</sup> Reflecting on the medium of design activism, we might ask these questions: Does the term denote activism in pursuit of social change, conducted through the medium of design? Or does it refer to activism intended to reform design itself? Or both?

Polly Cantlon discussed the Wellington Media Collective, whose 1978 slogan was “We will work with you, not for you”—a precursor of participatory design. The collective’s “design humanism” (the exercise of design activities for the purposes of social groups) addressed Maori land rights (Chris McBride and Chris Lipscombe) and women’s legal rights (Sharon Murdoch). By working collectively and thereby “designing design,” the Wellington Media Collective sought to reform both society and design at once. And Polly Hunter’s analysis of Yona Friedman’s guidebook, *Immediate Education for Survival*, provided further evidence that design activism and design reform are not mutually exclusive. Friedman insisted that his advice on matters such as how to build a hearth that uses less fuel is non-paternalistic and encourages invention rather than mere emulation. If we accept this characterization, his book becomes an exemplar of design reform that invites design activism in its readers.

Two weeks after the conference, a major exhibition, *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970-1990*, opened in London.<sup>6</sup> This conjunction made clear that the playful commercialism of postmodernism has ceded to conscience.<sup>7</sup> Climate change, materials shortages, the inequitable distribution of resources (including wealth and education), political instability, and globalization: these issues concern designers who want to be part of the solution, not the problem. They should concern practitioners of design history and design studies, too. Design activism provides a compelling prism through which to understand the past, and awareness of the history of design activism and design reform can inform the present.

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<sup>1</sup> OED Online, s.v. "activism, n." and "reform, n.2 and adj.," accessed November 8, 2011, <http://www.oed.com>.

<sup>2</sup> Alastair Fuad-Luke traces a history of design activism, but not a shift from "design reform" to "design activism," in *Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World* (London: Earthscan, 2009), 33-54.

<sup>3</sup> Fuad-Luke, *Design Activism*, 6, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Fry, *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics and New Practice* (Oxford: Berg, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Fuad-Luke, *Design Activism*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970-1990*, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, September 24, 2011, to January 15, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, this is a simplification, and we should recognize the input of what Fuad-Luke terms "Postmodern ecologists," *Design Activism*, 42-3.