

Book Review

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Developing citizen designers

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As the design industry evolves, so too does design education. Design, as a discipline as well as a mode of reasoning, essentially responds to the needs of people. Owing to the complex nature of problems that humanity faces – such as global warming, poverty, racial discrimination, to name a few – it is not surprising that socially responsible design has reached a critical moment and underpins contemporary design practice. Accordingly, it follows that design education has a responsibility to train and nurture students with a socially-minded and empathetic mindset so that they can be mindful of making ethical design decisions. Essentially, the role of a designer's response to a complex social, environmental or political problem is to move people to action, beyond mere awareness.

Developing citizen designers, by Elizabeth Resnick, is one such response to the call for designers to become responsible designers who embody and apply civic values in their practice. Nowadays, there is an increasing realisation that social responsibility no longer resides solely in the domain of national governments. In contemporary democracies, citizens seem to be recognising their sense of agency; as a result, they have more of a chance to have their voices heard. Social responsibility is now characterised by collective action and owing to design's participatory and human-centered ethos, designers are in a position to jumpstart dialogue, enable experiential education and drive innovation to address the complexity of contemporary problems. In keeping with this widening civic role of design, the content of this book is situated at the intersection of graphic design and citizenship and its impact for design education for social change.

Resnick, who is affiliated with the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (in Boston, the United States) as a professor of graphic design, is no newcomer to this discourse. Her publications include *Design for Communication: Conceptual Graphic Design Basics*

(2003) and *Graphic Design: A Problem-Solving Approach to Visual Communication* (1984). She has also contributed to popular American design publications such as *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*, *Graphis*, *Graphics International* and is a regular co-curator of design exhibitions. *Developing citizen designers*, her latest endeavour, presents a compilation of university-level, design project briefs. This genre of design book has pedagogic predecessors. For example, *Design school confidential: extraordinary class projects from the international design schools, colleges, and institutes*, edited by Steven Heller and Rita Talarico (2009) sets the tone for international best practice by curating 50 real-world project briefs for design educators and students. The projects are meant to provide educational models that may have value to bring design education closer to real-world practice. Andrew Shea's book, *Designing for social change: strategies for community-based graphic design* (2012), is another noteworthy example that moves the focus of design project briefs specifically towards social design. Like Shea's book, graphic design is also the vantage point of Resnick's latest publication. Overall, the critical stance and passionate position that Resnick adopts for her compilation allows her voice to be heard as a seminal one, alongside her contemporaries.

The book begins with a *Foreword* by Bernard Canniffe, affiliated with the Iowa State University in the United States. He provides a comprehensive social context, motivating the need for a book of this nature. By situating the book within the overarching discourse on design's relationship with civic engagement, Canniffe's basic premise is that 'we have the choice to engage or not'. To this end, he calls for the design profession to work together with design education. He also highlights that 'design is shifting away from the service-provider model and toward the content identifier model'. This stance reiterates the shift from a traditional design education focus from "form follows function" to "form follows content", where designers are stepping into the role of content facilitators. This shift in practice places a greater emphasis on design authorship and the responsibility that comes with such a role. According to Canniffe, 'there is a need for design to grow up and accept responsibility in order to meet the challenges that are set before us'.

In order to explore the multitude of themes that contribute to the discourse on socially- and civic-minded design, in a logical yet analytical manner, Resnick has divided the book into three overarching parts: Designing thinking, Design methodology and Making a difference. The first part, titled *Design Thinking*, addresses three topical approaches to socially conscious design practice by way of three separate sections, namely socially responsible design, design activism, and design authorship. In the second part of the book on *Design methodology*, Resnick addresses ways of interacting by exploring the nature and practice of collaborative learning, participatory design and service design. The third and final section of the book, *Making a difference*, presents contemporary social design pedagogy by means of written essays. The thematic titles of each of the

three sections not only defines each section of the book but also provides the reader with flags to better navigate and understand the related, sub-themes in each section. In this regard, the three parts serve as frames for the topic at hand. Kees Dorst (2015), in his book *Frame Innovation*, defines a frame as a point of view, which is adopted to address a specific design problem. Similarly, Resnick applies this designerly way of thinking to her rhetorical strategy for the book and provides three distinct, yet overlapping, frames for her readers to engage with its contents.

In my opinion, the structure of the book is where its greatest strength lies. The book allows the reader to decide how to navigate its contents, which is both descriptive and analytical in nature. The structure is not prescriptive and therefore offers the reader two options for engaging with it: a close reading of the entire book or any easy reference to a particular theme and/or related project. This approach makes the book accessible to educators and students alike who may have different intentions when using the book as a design resource.

Another strength, also related to the structure of the book, is that each part comprises an essay to explicate the theme as well as interviews with design practitioners and design educators (save for the *Resources* section in the third part of the book). The interviews are all five-question interviews, where the questions serve as probes and provocations to tackle the conceptual articulation of what it means to be a citizen designer and what it may entail to become one. The interviews open up the dialogue by inviting experts to lend their voices on the topic. These experts range from academics such as Omar Vulpinari (previously affiliated with the Italian, communication research centre, Fabrica) to design practitioners such as South African based communication designer, Jacques Lange (former president of Icograda, the International Council of Communication Design). The fact that similar sentiments are shared by the interviewees about the widening role of design in societies, further supports the awareness that nurturing citizen designers is not exclusive for a particular geographic setting but is in fact being acknowledged nowadays as a global requirement.

While the theoretical contributions of each section shape the theoretical scaffolding of the book, each section is further developed with a number of case studies to show the theory in practice. The case studies, which are grouped thematically, take the form of project briefs. Each case study comprises procedural information that provides insights about the way the brief was set, how it was answered by students and critiqued by the respective educator/s. Each case study also has sections on the project's effectiveness and assessment, highlighting that reflection-on-action plays a pivotal role for the social design process. The case studies are valuable as resources in that they illustrate the application of existing design methodologies. While the two dominant methodologies

evident in the case studies are human-centered design and design thinking the selection of case studies is not limited to them. One example of a lesser-used, qualitative visual method that is also pronounced in the book is photovoice. As its name suggests, photovoice uses photography to empower citizens to record their environment first-hand and to use this “way of seeing” as a springboard for subsequent social action.

To this end, the book provides readers with a holistic overview of the process of social action and ideally social change, ranging from the conception of the brief to students’ responses to the brief. The case studies also serve as valuable examples of doing research for design by explaining how placing students on the field teaches them to conduct primary research with human subjects in an ethical manner, using research methods such as interviews and focus groups. Subsequently, information about the assessment of the projects guides the reader to carefully consider the criteria of assessment, which classifies the respective design solutions as successful outcomes or not. As a result, this extensive range of information per case study makes the reader feel that the educator is present in the text.

While at the same time that the case studies serve as tutorials, the tone of the book is motivating and encourages educators to pursue socially responsible design in their curricula and students to see socially responsible design as an empathic way of thinking. This speaks to the particular nature of design practice in that there are no cookie-cutter ways to replicate projects; instead, projects are contingent on the topic at hand as well as the real-world location where the design output will be used and/or experienced. Similar to Shea (2012), who provides different strategies for community projects with a social agenda as well as suggestions for project funding in his book, Resnick’s literary contribution also provides a broad scope for socially responsible design by including examples that traverse the use of different media to convey messages. In terms of the visual articulation of socially responsible projects, the book may be considered inclusive by way of its marriage between image and text. Unfortunately, however, even though the book presents case studies from many different countries, case studies from the so-called global South are outnumbered by their Northern counterparts. While case studies from South America are included, there is a glaring lack of case studies from the African continent. The only project in the book that addresses a social need in Africa is facilitated by an international institution; hence, even though the South African city of Johannesburg was selected as a project site for a particular student project, the case study is presented from a European design education vantage point.

Notwithstanding the fact that a citizen is inextricably linked to the nation in which the citizen resides, there needs to be a bigger focus on civic engagement in design discourse that goes beyond the North American and Eurocentric aspirations that seem to permeate

much of the discourse. Hence, while there are examples of projects from around the world, there is a tendency to highlight differences rather than a diversity of approaches and this is what design books like this should caution against. Since there is no mould or measures of “right and wrong” when it comes to design, the value of a particular design response or output is ideally based on its appropriateness.

In addition to its appropriateness, the realisation of a particular project from concept to implementation is largely dependent on funding. This implies that despite social projects being altruistic in nature, they are generally bound by financial constraints. The case studies highlight that academic institutions often partner with local non-profit organisations or even governmental organisations to secure funding but these relationships need to be managed carefully to avoid a project losing its social intent and becoming subservient to the funders. Hence, because the design solutions to many real-world, project briefs are not always put into production because of financial and other constraints, they are referred to by Resnick as pedagogic projects of ‘good intentions’.

Following from the above, newcomers to this discourse, and by extension this book, should be cautioned of using the selected projects of ‘good intentions’ in the book as a guide to perpetuate normative practices for social design. Instead, readers should be reminded that the discourse at large would benefit from celebrating the diversity of approaches and funding models that are contingent on local needs and nationalities.

This word of caution aside, overall, the book’s message is confident and clear: designers need to be trained as T-shaped professionals; that is, professionals with the depth of disciplinary design knowledge as well a broad spectrum awareness, particularly of different social and cultural contexts. It is this broad spectrum of awareness that Tunstall, for example, recognises as the defining characteristic of design anthropology in her essay in the final part of the book. Tunstall sees design anthropology as being ‘explicitly concerned with the cultural – how design translates values into tangible experiences, such that it respects other ways of being in the world.’ This viewpoint resonates with other contributors’ views, such as Bennett, who discusses the concept of ‘design geographies’ as well as Margolin’s contribution in the book, which sketches the widening scope and potential of communication design.

In conclusion, I return to the title of the book, *Developing citizen designers*. The explicit reference to citizens cannot be ignored since it seeps throughout the contents of the book; the word ‘citizen’ is imbued with civic values that socially responsible design advocates and tries to apply in terms of the design process, including tolerance, empathy and trust to name a few. In keeping with these values, the book speaks of the civic responsibility that design educators have to nurture and hone the design skills of future

designers so that they can provide appropriate and meaningful solutions for the common good through their personal as well as professional practice. Ultimately, the book provides readers with a more concrete grasp of what civic design looks like and the processes that design uses to facilitate participation in civic life. Therefore, once Resnick's book is read from cover to cover, the topic does not come to a close but the book successfully opens another chapter in the discourse by leaving readers to ponder on the following questions: What does it mean to be a designer? What does it mean to be a citizen? And how can the two be interchangeable?

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