

BSA Seminar

## Design and 'the Social': Mapping new Approaches to Inequality in Design

Mona Sloane, Nell Beecham

LSE Sociology

Text by Mona Sloane and Nell Beecham

'Design' is a term that is gaining momentum in social science research, with new works engaging with the term emerging in anthropology (Gunn et al 2015), cultural studies (Kimbell 2011; McRobbie 2016), science and technology studies (Farias & Wilkie 2016) and philosophy (Parsons 2015). These important works explore how actors operate in wider cultural and economic fields. Seemingly missing from this picture is a critical engagement with the ways in which designers theorise, engage with, and act upon notions of 'the social' and how these may challenge or reaffirm (social) 'inequality'. Designers are tasked with speculating about future ways of living and therefore engage in 'sociological' practices, putting a range of 'classificatory systems' (Tyler 2015) to work to make sense of and design for people. 'Classing' people as part of this commercial and 'sociological work' is not only socially intentional, but consequential. It can, therefore, reaffirm or challenge 'inequality' beyond the notions of 'class' and 'capital' (Bourdieu 1986).

The BSA seminar 'Design and 'the Social': Mapping new Approaches to Inequality in Design' looked to map out current social science research and thinking on the link between 'design' and 'inequality' to explore how designers operate as social theorists, actors and activists. It took place on Tuesday 7 February 2017 at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and was organised by Mona Sloane and Nell Beecham (both PhD candidates at LSE Sociology) and co-hosted by LSE's International Inequalities Institute and Theatrum Mundi.

The event was premised on an active engagement with the current and politically pressing inequality debate against the backdrop of the specificities of design as a profession that is both creative and commercial. The two sessions saw a range of compelling papers that traced notions and enactments of 'the social' in contemporary and historic design practices to discuss the following questions: In what ways do designers operate on and engage with 'the social'? What kinds of concepts emerge in relation to (social) inequalities when we look at different design processes? How can engaging with design practices broaden the discussion of inequality?

Prof Mike Savage (Co-Director of LSE's International Inequalities Institute) welcomed the interdisciplinary group of delegates and participants with a brief paper on the political and intellectual stakes of 'inequality'. He raised that today, we must speak of inequality not only in terms of economic inequality or distribution of wealth, but of 'cultural inequality'. The Bourdieu'an notion of (class) division through cultural capital and 'high-brow' culture, however, may not be the most helpful for describing these cultures of inequalities. Moreover, designers may be part of a new 'technical cultural class' that draws on an 'emerging cultural capital' and plays a fundamental role in how social inequality manifests in wider social, political and economic contexts.

Dr Evangelia Chryssikou (University College London) opened the first session with a paper on the inequity of health vs mental health provision as played out in the architecture for mental health facilities. She began her presentation with describing the contemporary division between design/architecture and knowledge of the body to then introduce her current research project 'The social invisibility of mental health facilities'. Here, the multi-disciplinary research compares healthcare vs mental health facilities of the same catchment area, particularly in terms of access (specifically via public transport) and architectural condition. The theme of inequality in design was addressed by discussing how design may contribute to the social exclusion and stigmatisation of the mentally ill, for example through architecture that is designed to keep patients inside or planning paradigms that locate mental health facilities at the urban periphery.

Ellen K Foster (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) presented her empirical research on feminist interventions in the design of Do It Yourself (DIY) and maker communities in the US. Here, she critically reflected on how both maker and hacker communities promote a discourse that is about design and inclusion (makers) and design and equality (hackers). Unpacking the narratives and realities of this discourse via feminist scholarship, however, helps reveal gender-, race- and class-biases that permeate in these specialized debates about 'design' and technological expertise. Furthermore, the implicit barriers that emerge from these biases exclude certain lifestyles and expertise from contributing to a wider discourse on design in the cultural scenes of hacking and making.

In the last paper of the first session, Nitin Bathla (independent researcher and social designer based in Delhi) reflected on his practice based research project. Using the pioneering work of the Italian designer Enzo Mari to underpin his work, Bathla explored how critical examination of the relationship between producer and consumer can be stimulated through practical work. His paper, 'Autoprogettazione as a Social Project,' traced through the ideological exercise of Autoprogettazione, a term coined by Mari in 1974, which roughly translates into English as 'a proposal for self design'. Bathla related this to the practical application of open access furniture design within his own project housed in a low-income neighbourhood of Delhi. Through a five week programme participants in his project were offered the opportunity to learn and develop skills in furniture making and design. Within the practical application of these skills they were encouraged to critically evaluate the hierarchies between designers, producers, and consumers. Bathla notes that, in an increasingly post industrial age, contemporary application of Mari's principles can serve as a means to critique social values and illuminate inequalities.

The discussion was chaired by Prof Angela McRobbie (Professor of Communications at Goldsmiths College) and focussed on the politics of design, especially the question of exclusion in and through design, a theme that emerged from all three papers of the first session. Particularly the case of mental health facilities was discussed, asking whether (physical, social) exclusion is designed or desired. Leading on from that, the knock-on effects of design were discussed, asking what is at stake (politically) when a mental health facility is planned and designed (for example, what are the implications for family members who care for mental health patients). Here, Prof Angela McRobbie remarked that these kinds of discussions currently do not overlap with fashion, that there is a disconnect between the different vocabularies of design. This means that there is a need to investigate not only different design

practices per se, but the wider policy environments that encourage and maintain them. The question then is how to be critical and political within them.

The first session was then closed by Dr Adam Kaasa (Director Theatrum Mundi, LSE) who presented Theatrum Mundi's projects which resonate with the theme of design and inequality. In particular, he spoke about the 'Designing for Free Speech' project which asked if design interventions in New York City can re-activate the First Amendment rights. Furthermore, Kaasa introduced the 'Designing the Urban Commons' project, an idea competition for new ideas to reclaim public space in London. He also spoke about the 'Designing Respect' project, a similar competition held in Rio de Janeiro that asked whether an aesthetic of respect can be designed. Exhibition boards from both projects were exhibited at the seminar. Kaasa closed his presentation by speaking about Theatrum Mundi's 'Designing Politics: The Limits of Design', a project that assembles a working group to structurally re-think the relationship between 'design' and 'politics'.

Dr Dimitrios Charitatos (Democritus University) opened the second session of the workshop with his paper 'Pauperized Luxury Design and Economic Crisis', which explored the notion of 'luxury products' in the context of economic recession in Greece. Following the 2009 debt crisis Charitatos noted within his field research a stark increase in the availability of what he terms 'attainable luxury products' marketed directly towards the now pauperised middle classes of Greece. These consumers, no longer able to pursue the large luxuries of a car or mortgage offered to a previous generation, are granted opportunity to distinguish themselves through the brands they purchase. Charitatos highlighted the role of designers and marketers in reframing everyday products as exclusive and deserving of a higher price tag, noting how much of this reconceptualising is reliant on social understandings of class and inequality.

Dr Smita Yadav (University of Sussex) spoke directly to the topic of inequality in design through a paper on 'Redesigning Social Inequality, Modern Infrastructure, and Social Mobility in India'. Her presentation explored the role of the welfare state in developing new transport networks which reconfigure access to employment in India. Here, the 'modernisation' of India's infrastructure poses itself as globally attractive investment opportunity whereby the state takes up the role of a broker for these commercialisation efforts. Yadav notes that the role of the welfare state as agent for decreasing social inequality is at odds with this new broker role. Her future research will focus, in parts, on how inequality is increased through the design of these new infrastructure projects, for example by investigating how indigenous communities are affected by these projects, but also how they locate themselves within them. Her ethnography of private and public sector alliances in the infrastructure sector will, furthermore, explore who makes what kinds of claims as infrastructure design is developed and who gets excluded from access to this infrastructure. Within that, she will furthermore research forms of resistance against instantiations of aggressive capitalism. Yadav closed by arguing that notions of 'design' play an important role for analysing how conceptions of contemporary urban life may affect mobility and therefore social inequality.

Fani Kostourou (University College London) closed the second session of the event with her discussion of the role of architecture and urban housing design in social 'reform'. Her paper, 'Mass Factory Housing: Design and Social Reform' utilised the example of Cité Ouvrière in Mulhouse, France, to examine how architectural design and urban planning decisions influence

the ways in which home owners relate to and organise the space they inhabit. Tracing through the history of mass factory housing, arriving at its contemporary iteration and adaptation Kostourou presented a compelling argument for how poor design decisions have long-term affects on housing occupier's daily lives. She also argued that contemporary flexible planning regulation for these former Mass Factory Housing contributes to resilient multi-cultural communities: her research showed that families who were allowed to extend their homes according to their needs formed close bonds with their neighbours. These bonds, then, contributed to strong and well-organised communities who still occupy their homes.

This second session was chaired by Dr Liz Moor (Senior Lecturer in Media and Communications, Goldsmiths College) and the discussion focussed on contemporary forms of housing and the possibility of access to processes of making, particularly in the UK. Here, equality in design was discussed as, for example, DIY housing communities. However, access to these kinds of initiatives is unequal, not everyone has the economic, cultural and social capital to participate in these rare projects. Leading on from that, the discussion turned to the case of social housing, particularly in London, where many (modernist) housing estates are currently being demolished to sell land to private developers and rebuild social housing stock elsewhere. It was suggested that housing is not being treated as a spatial concept anymore, but as an economic one. Furthermore, an alternative reading to 'attainable luxury' was suggested which was based on urban micro-economies that create employment and disrupt the production and distribution cycles of big corporations.

The key note presentation of the seminar was delivered by Dr Lucy Kimbell (Director of the Innovation Insights Hub, University of the Arts, London). The focus of her talk centred on the contemporary structure of design practice, utilising examples from her current research on the UK government's Policy Lab, with whom she recently worked with over a year. Her presentation opened with the question 'what do we mean by the term design?', noting a contemporary shift away from design as a process of production and consumption inherently tied to, and organised around, the object, into a conception of design that focuses on consequences and configurations. Dr Kimbell outlined that understanding this transition from outputs of designing to outcomes of designing, is imperative if we are to make sense of new locations in which design practices are used. Highlighting the expansion of the field of design practice, she gave a brief set of examples in which design practice has been practically applied in business and governmental settings, drawing together key structural similarities. Here, she emphasised that contemporary design practice could be distinguished by its understanding of design as socio-material configurations which have social and political consequences. This understanding, Dr Kimbell noted, has encouraged a move away from designing for users and instead has encouraged lead to the concept of designing by and with users, in a more participatory format that is seemingly more inclusive. Exploring this notion of co-design further, Dr Kimbell drew links to her current research which looks at the adoption and adaption of design practices and expertise in a government context, outlining how ways of thinking about design are now being applied to influence government action and policy decisions. She closed by noting the underlying tension of the application of design thinking in policy labs, highlighting that design practice possesses the power to disrupt and reveal the ungovernable, a trait that did not always lend itself well to government efforts to create 'good citizens'. Drawing this back to the topic of responsibility, she left the question open to the audience of 'what is the role of design and design practitioners in this context?'

Mona Sloane and Nell Beecham then closed the seminar with a brief conclusion on 'inequality' and 'design', observing three main themes that emerged from both sessions: First, the debate around inclusion/exclusion that seems to be internal to the discourse of design and designers, particularly with regards to how design work is organised and configured in wider social, political and economic contexts. Second, (in-)equality in design as expressions of care towards users and participants of design. Third, the importance of the body as locus of design experience, but also of making, thinking and skill. Overall, the seminar strongly indicated that both notions of 'design' and 'inequality', and the way in which they link up empirically and analytically, are diverse and complex – but highly complex in and for our contemporary social worlds. Papers and the lively discussions showed that we are only at the beginning of exploring how 'design' and 'the social' are connected and may help reaffirm or tackle the growing social inequality we face today. Clearly, more research and discussions is needed and anticipated and we look forward to participate in and facilitate this new discourse on 'design' and 'inequality'.