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THE ROLE OF DESIGNERS IN A DEMOCRACY

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Abstract. There's been a recent call for designers around the world to take more than a cursory interest in democratic discourses and political happenings in their domains; although, this is aimed at strengthening democratic practices, the intricacies and dynamics of contemporary political systems currently makes this, antithetical to the traditional role of the designer in a society. Thus, this paper highlights the conflicts surrounding the characterizations and practicality of contemporary democracy and the challenges of associating it with design and designers. It further argues that the design community as an entity lacks the requisite credibility to lead a pro-democracy campaign in view of its own questionable democratic credentials. The paper concludes that rather than join the populist bandwagon of slogan-chanting pro-democracy activists, the design community as an entity should become politically agnostic, but more socially-conscious – focusing solely on the social welfare of the people in every community it serves – whether in democracies, monarchies or communist states.

1. Introduction

In March, 2017, the design commune woke up to an open letter from Designers Enzio Manzini and Victor Margoni. The letter titled: *Stand up for Democracy*, is a passionate appeal to the global design community, to become more involved in protecting and upholding the tenets of democracy in their respective communities. The crux of the letter is highlighted thus:

> *There are attacks on democracy in several countries including those where democracy had seemed to be unshakable. Faced by these developments, we believe the design community should take a stand, speak out, and act; to defend the core values of democracy. Beyond expressing and sharing our concern, this letter aspires to help deepen and amplify actions in which the design community, with all its richness and diversity, is already taking a stand. These discussions and initiatives deserve more visibility.*

> *...to those members of this community who agree with the spirit of this letter, we propose three actions: write a personal statement of less than 500 words; circulate the statement in your networks; organize an event in the next few months. The two of us are committed to collect these statements, plus information about events as they are organised, and make them visible in all ways possible... We hope that it will stimulate designers to stand up and fight for democracy in their own communities and throughout the world.*

Ezio Manzini and Victor Margolin
Chicago, 5 March 2017

Overall, Manzini and Margolin's letter raises very timely concerns about the sad state of contemporary democratic practices around the world and urges designers to deploy the instrumentality of design to further deepen the tenets of democracy in their respective domains. Although, it is still yet unclear how well the missive succeeded in raising political consciousness amongst designers over the last one year; its singular fixation on democracy as a system of governance unwittingly plays into very controversial political territory, at least on three fronts.

Firstly, the characterization of the term democracy is already a very contentious issue, and mentioning it in the same breath as design, further compounds an already sticky situation. Design is a familiar subject, one whose characterization is nearly universal; democracy on the other hand, has remained an ambiguous subject that often defies a unitary characterization (Beyme, 1991). Although, Manzini and Margolin had cautiously taken a middle road in this regard, conceding that:

> *We do not have to share exactly the same idea of what democracy is: to defend it as a core value, it is enough to recognize the strong convergence between democracy and design...* (Manzini & Margoni, 2017)

Unfortunately, these 'core values' are today as fluid as the many interests behind each democracy. Presently, it has become increasingly difficult to determine what constitutes a democracy; as these characterizations practically changes with the time zones − often at the whims and caprices of those upon whom it bestows the most privileges in any given geographical enclave. Even worse, it is often fairly difficult for designers to translate democratic ideals into tangible artefacts. Joan Ockman in her piece for *Dissent*, best summarizes this:

> *The ideological ambiguities that surround democratic claims by architects point not only to the difficulties of translating political concepts into three dimensions but also, the historical instability of the term democracy itself, which despite its symbolic value has frequently amounted to a hurrah word or safe-conduct pass* (Ockman, 2011)

The second controversy bothers on the growing concerns about the efficacy of contemporary democracy as a system of governance. The failings of democracy and democratic institutions in several third world states around the world (especially in Africa), is raising a lot of fundamental questions about the credibility of democracy as a political system (Kurlantzick, 2011). Oftentimes, the grim conditions under which the majority of citizens of these supposed democratic states live in, often tempts one to ask: if they were less fortunate than their contemporaries living under thriving economies and better social conditions in monarchies or communist states like the UAE and China respectively. One is further tempted to ask: if it was better to prop-up a political system that guaranteed terminal elections but not food or shelter for its people or that, which is undemocratic yet avails nearly every citizen more than enough to eat and a decent place to sleep.

The reality today is that, in spite of the reverence accorded democratic principles in our society today, in actual practice, democratic states have thrown up as much injustice and inequality as any of the other systems its proponents pontificate against. In a good number of states in the Global South, despots have assumed leadership roles and are constantly using the instrumentality of democratic institutions, to perpetuate themselves in power; often tampering with the constitution and going through the motions of holding perennial elections to remain in power – some, for as long as twenty-five years (Abiodun, *et al*., 2018).

Thirdly, it is an irony that Manzini and Margolin's letter put designers forward, as plausible pro-democracy advocates, especially in the light of the recurring anti-democratic narratives currently plaguing the design community. Today, leading elements within the design community are as guilty of subverting the democratic ideals of equity and social inclusion, as the political class they have been mandated to go up against. Presently, a good number of design practices by their racial and gender inequity have clearly fallen short of the very ideals the letter implores them to promote (Gang, 2018).

In addition to this, most people view designers as an integral core of the social class responsible for the unpleasant socio-economic narratives, which the current dysfunctional political systems have birthed. Hence, the design community presently lacks the empathy of the masses, to lead any meaningful opposition against this unjust political setup, of which it is one of its biggest beneficiaries. Today, the perception around the world is that, in the midst of grave poverty and social inequality, designers are indulging in economic wastages by taking on, expensive grandiose design briefs for the political class, one often funded with coveted communal resources (Agbo, 2017). These are the kinds of conjectures Manzini and Margolin's missive exposes designers to; inadvertently drawing them into a labyrinthine debate about the broader questions swirling around democratic discourses.

In my opinion asking designers to lead their own partisan '*Spring*' or '*Occupy*' revolution could be futile and probably fatal in states where other 'working' political systems are firmly grounded. Even within democracies, they would be further pushed to pick a side – left or right and afterwards made to decide how near or far they wish to stand on the side they picked; a reality that strips them of their neutrality and by extension, the leverage to effectively engage the political class without an ideological baggage. Although, designers have a civic obligation to uphold the tenets of democracy in their individual communities, doing so as a collective, portrays the design community as bias or partisan towards one political system over another.

In spite of how much powers we would have loved to arrogate to the designer, the reality is that he/she is politically powerless to cause the kind of political change we all crave. The right social strategy for the design community is to create exemplary social narratives for the political class to follow, whether in democracies, monarchies or communist states. What this means is that, the design community as an entity must become politically agnostic – focusing solely on the welfare of the people in every community it serves; using design to offer innovative solutions that cushions the effect of poor political decisions around the world (one designers have very little control over).

For designers, activism should be more practical than rhetorical; and rather than confront the political class with pro-democracy rhetoric, designers must play the role of non-partisan mediators between the ruling class and the masses, and through exemplary social design, offer valid solutions to social problems in each community. The beauty of this approach is that it absolves the architect of the burden of political partisanship, while

giving him/her wider acceptability and consequent leverage to carry out his/her social agenda.

Presently, precedence is already being set in this regard by a good number of socially-leaning designers. What started in some cases as realignment occasioned by the 2008 financial crisis; that necessitated designers to seek out other ventures as a result of waning big budget commissions; is gradually becoming a growing design ideology (McGuirk, 2014). These architects are today swapping prestigious project sites around the world, for *favelas* and neglected backwater communities and are confronting the bludgeoning hegemony of social inequality using social housing, inclusive design etc. (Salingaros, *et al*., 2006)

Within the last decade, several socially-leaning design practices have emerged around the world, such as, Active Social Architecture (ASA) based in Kigali, Rwanda amongst several others; all of which are currently using design to lead social interventions across communities. These practices, offer a participatory design approach that encourages members of each community to be part of these communal interventions – a narrative that aptly depicts the essence of genuine democratic principles. This design approach has been further validated by the 2016 Pritzker prize award to Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, largely for his work at ELEMENTAL. The award signified a plausible ideological shift of the architecture community from the focus on 'flamboyant' design to that which celebrates the designer as a social change-maker (Wood, 2017). In conclusion, I believe these kinds of social engagements will ultimately have a further-reaching effect on a society, than designers joining the over-crowded slogan chanting bandwagon and placard brandishing cavalcades of pro-democracy activists.

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