On design as liberal art: The art of advancements

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English Summary

Research topic: In this thesis, I examine the nature of designing without a product (Jones 1980). Traditional design thinking was concerned with designing objects that are means to a pre-defined end, ranging from chairs to medical equipment to satellites. Design without a product is concerned with discovering what would make a new design work for the people engaging in or with it. In their practice, designers develop and are guided by a set of design theories of what they think would make a new design work. These theories are independent of the object of design; they can be equally applied to the design of for instance, a new online community or an offline participatory exhibition. The importance of designing without a product is that it is an act of designing visible across all domains of human life (Alexander et al. 1977), be it developing a new curriculum for a course, creating a new choreography for a dance performance or planning a new way of working together in an organization. Designing without a product is not exclusively the domain of professional designers; it is a type of designing shared and performed by all those concerned with improving their world.

Researchers have been so far restricted in exploring empirical cases and in theorizing about the nature of designing without a product. That is the case as the current understanding of design has been dominated by the design as process paradigm (Lawson 2006, Cross 2011). This paradigm puts forward a view of design as a mechanical art of problem solving by initiating change in stable products or systems. Design is seen a goal oriented process in which designers employ cognitive design thinking and scientifically tested theories of design. Juxtaposing designing products with designing without a product, we obtain different conceptualizations of what the design world is made of. The design field is riddled with uncertainties about the nature of the design object, design process and methods, design knowledge and acts of designing. These uncertainties ignite various controversies (Latour 2005, Venturini 2010) in the design practice about how to define the object of design, what knowledge is needed in designing, how to approach it and with what desired goals.

My aim in this thesis is to explore these design uncertainties and deploy the controversies visible in the design practice in order to learn what designing without a product has become in the daily practice of those engaging in it. Building on Buchanan (1992, 1995, 2001), I want to
move away from the taken for granted view of designing as a mechanical art for problem solving to a view of design as a liberal art of advancements. I am guided in this aim by three research questions, adapted for the study of design from Latour (2005):

- How to deploy the many controversies about designing without a product without restricting designing in advance to a specific domain (individual or structural)?
- How to render fully traceable the means allowing designers to stabilize these controversies?
- Through which procedures it is possible to reassemble designing without a product not as a mechanical art of solving design problems but as a liberal art of advancements?

**Research methodology:** Drawing inspiration from Latour (2005), I adopt an Actor Network Theory methodology for studying design. Ontologically, this methodology puts forward a view of the design world as made by a dynamic assemblage of people and the objects they live and work with. The design world is viewed as constantly negotiated, emerging and advancing out of the multiple interactions and performances of this heterogeneous assemblage. Through these negotiations, it is not only the designed which changes and is advanced. The designers and the practice of designing itself are transforming too.

Epistemologically, this methodology proposes a view of knowledge as co-created in practice, as integral to doing (Strati 2007, Gherardi 2009, 2010, 2012). Knowledge does not reside in individuals’ heads, nor is it a production factor which can be easily managed, stored and used strategically. Rather, knowledge is seen as “a collective, situated activity” (Gherardi 2012: 199). Knowing and learning is something people achieve together by engaging in collective action (Corradi et al. 2010, Nicolini 2011).

Empirically, I learned about the practice of designing without a product by following the design work performed at the Amsterdam Museum. I studied how the museum employees and their collaborators engaged in transforming the museum from a historical, knowledge authoritarian institution, to a story-centered, participatory, online and offline meeting place. I learned about their design practice by means of extensive observations, reflective interviews and document analysis. As a research design, I employed the strategy of deploying controversies developed by Latour (2005) and Venturini (2010).
**Research insights:** By examining the uncertainties in the field of design on the nature of design object, design knowledge, design process and the acts of designing, and by deploying the different controversies designers in this study engaged in their work, I obtained a different view on designing than offered in the field of designing products. Designing without a product is not a mechanical art, a goal oriented process, in which a designer solves problems by initiating change in a stable product or system. Designing without a product is a goal in itself (Jones 1980). It is concerned with initiating change in ‘constitutive entanglements’ (Orlikowski 2007) between people and the things they work and live with, of which the designer and those concerned with the designed are a part too. It is not a design performed by drawing representations of the world but by drawing things together in the world. The designers’ focus is on how to make the emerging assemblage of people and things work. Design knowledge is a sensible knowing in practice, sustained and refined through ‘taste making’ (Gherardi 2009), namely through the collective negotiation and appraisal of a preferred way of doing things. To design is no longer a way of mastering and controlling singular, agreed-upon matters of fact. It is a way of engaging with matters of concern which are multiple, ambiguous and debatable (Latour 2004). It is a matter of being in the world, of engagement, empathy and care.

I build on Buchanan’s (1992, 1995, 2001) conceptualization of design as liberal art, by developing an understanding of designing without a product as a liberal art of advancements. As a liberal art of advancements, designing without a product is an art of living, of being in the world that involves everybody and everything as equal partners in changing the world. It is an art not focused on developing products but on creating the circumstances that people and things can live and work together and enrich each other’s lives. In designing without a product, the designers’ concern is no longer of how to be good technicians or good researchers in user tests and parameters calculations; it is about how to be good participants in the world.

**Theoretical contributions:** I contribute to design theory by offering empirical insights of designing without a product (Jones 1980) and by theorizing about its nature as a liberal art of advancements. I extend Jones’ (1980) definition of design as ‘to initiate change in man-made things’, a definition that continues to dominate the design literature. I propose an understanding of design as to initiate change in ‘constitutive entanglements’ (Orlikowski 2007) among people and the things they live and work with. Rethinking the notion of design
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contributes to a theorizing about designing as a performative, sociomaterial practice (Knorr Cetina 2001, Gherardi 2012) in which the material is a constitutive element, rather than a means to an end.

I contribute to Buchanan’s (1992, 1995, 2001) effort to understand the nature of design as liberal art by drawing on Gherardi’s (2009, 2010) notions of collective knowing in practice and taste making. I extend Buchanan’s view of design as a liberal art by examining it from a post-humanist perspective (Latour 2005, Orlikowski 2007). I offer empirical evidence that design as liberal art is an art of living with things, of advancing constitutive entanglements, of which the designers are a part too. Rather than being an art performed through cognitive processes of placements, design as a liberal art of advancements is performed through place-making, or taste making. It nurtures a knowing by doing, by engaging in practice with others in continuous appraisal.

I contribute to organizational design by offering empirical evidence of organizational designing by drawing things together for advancements. This type of designing is different from designing through strategic planning for effectiveness. Researchers interested in studying organizational design, as well as those interested in initiating changes in their organizations would benefit more from examining the constitutive entanglement between technologies and organizations.