

Fostering resistance: Acknowledging notions of power exertion and politics in design facilitation

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ABSTRACT

Design facilitation, intended as both the overarching process and the mediating act between a facilitator and other actors, has increasingly gained popularity due to the participatory, inclusive, co-creative, and empathic principles associated with it. The sudden recognition of the field has nonetheless led to the use and misuse of participatory practices, causing an exponential loss of their political origins [12]. Design facilitation has become a buzzword, rendering inevitable the adoption and adaptation of different definitions to it. The research delves into the interconnectedness between design, power, politics and participatory practices to explore contemporary mainstream notions within design that are worth being revisited and challenged from an alternative stance. It focuses on acknowledging and rendering visible design facilitation's otherwise often unaddressed political nature by making more explicit its underpinning structures and components. It critically contrasts contemporary views of facilitation, which are typically apolitical, against revised notions of it that take into consideration power dynamics and political implications with the aim of highlighting the importance of unpacking concepts and areas of design to foster a more accountable practice and research, as opposed to merely moving on a superficial level.

Author Keywords

Design; facilitation; politics; power: philosophy; PD; participatory design; resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Design, through history, has increasingly gained recognition and relevance, leading many authors, including myself, to wonder about its relationship with the political sphere (c.f [8, 9, 7, 4]). The research is prompted by the urge to “*examine and articulate the (powerful) role of design*” [1] by looking at the intersections between participatory design, facilitation, power and politics.

Design facilitation has enjoyed an exponential increase in acceptance and demand during the past decades, extending to several areas of design. The recurrent use of terminology has served me as motivation to attempt to unpack its significance and to investigate its connection to power and politics, intended as the political [4] in relation to design practice. Ambiguous terms become open to interpretation, and this can be a double-edged sword, opening a path towards deliberately misleading and deceiving crafted discourses as well. Some examples of this in design facilitation can be generalizations (using the term as an umbrella term for any participative activity), hazy notions of the role of the designer (regarding who gets to be a facilitator), unclear intentions (therefore unclear accountability) and loss of credibility (due to the embellishment around it).

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research is entirely theoretical and draws on principles of transdisciplinary research. Three lenses - critique, unpacking, and language use - are established and applied to an extensive analysis of literature belonging to design, philosophy, social studies, and political sciences. The lenses enable the spotting of misleading discourses and misuse of terminology. Said approach aims to foster a better understanding of the complexity behind the explored theoretical notions and to evaluate their current use. Moreover, it also takes into consid-

ration a plurality of voices by reviewing three doctoral dissertations [12, 7, 6] that address these interconnected spheres and analyzing their research processes and drawing insight from the way they clash and overlap.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The methodological choice was to adopt a systematic literature review, which is intended to be comprehensive, systematic and transparent [13], principles which become essential in facilitating reproduction [5]. This approach helped in dealing with broad and vast spheres, as it allowed zooming in and out on different topics, yet still making sense to the overall picture. Simultaneously, it was combined with a narrative synthesis [13]. The methods used were critical reviews [5] and a recursive literature review approach [11]. The research also made use of multiple micro-methods that fit the specific needs of the research plan.

POWER EXERTION

Addressing complex issues such as the unpacking of areas like facilitation requires a different approach to research, as when the object of design shifts, *“one cannot just resort to routine knowledge and methods”* [3]. The research attempts to explain, from a mainly philosophical stance, how power comes to be exercised by people and brought into society. Firstly, the focus is on opting for specific definitions of power which connect power, politics and design. A thorough analysis of the significance of such definitions, together with an inspection of relevant characteristics then provide a suitable basis for a more complex examination of the procedures behind the exertion of power. Said exploration on power allows for a deeper inspection of the different layers that underpin facilitation, as to individuate causality and underlying mechanisms.

FINDINGS

The research explores different politically-charged aspects of design facilitation such as framing, empowerment, agency, determined participation and consensus in order to create parallels between design-related and power-related notions. Drawing from the literature review and the critical analyses of the reviewed doctoral dissertations, three main learnings are highlighted.

Firstly, a notable need to carry out more research in the field of participation. As participatory practices such as facilitation extend and expand to unknown territories, the need for newer and more refined research

approaches becomes visible. Research ought to focus more on spotting and investigating the different intersections between areas such as PD, practice, research, facilitation, politics and power. Doing so becomes an exercise of deliberate unframing and unpacking of mainstream notions so far well-rooted in practice. Secondly, the malleability of participatory terminology. The research delves into how multiple, divergent and complementary claims can be made by adapting participatory terminology to fit certain discourses; further research is needed on best practices in terms of communicating participation in a transparent way and with enhanced ownership. Thirdly, the mainstream notion of the design facilitator is perceived as an agent that enables interaction between different stakeholders, but in use, it is referred to as a power position claim. It is seen as creating a distance in roles and imposing a hierarchical detachment between participants that mainly serves the purpose of legitimizing and normalizing the actions of the designer in PD contexts. In other occasions, facilitation is not seen as a physical role undertaken by a designer, but as a bigger, overarching act of power exertion ingrained within design as a discipline. Further findings are also elaborated by using the different established lenses (critique, language use and unpacking) as a foundation.

CONCLUSION

Two possible alternative approaches to design facilitation are introduced in the research. To begin with, I propose focusing on *“deliberate resistance”* [14]. In this scenario, participation becomes a two-way commitment, as simultaneously participants enhance their working skills. Deliberate resistance, then, refers to the voluntary engagement in an exercise of ‘power to’ through a deliberate resignation of it, despite possessing the agency to do so. This could potentially open up ways to collaborate in a less dominant way, as well as leaving room for uncertainty and its components such as contemplating non-linearity, dissensus, imperceptible factors and changing states.

Another option is to adopt an approach based on principles of prefigurative politics, a term coined to refer to a movement, or mode of practice that would embody *“those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are [its] ultimate goal”* [10].

A socio-politically aware form of design facilitation becomes an excellent match with prefigurative politics

as they would both ideally engage in critique of the status quo through proactive iterative experimentation of alternatives with the end goal of implementing balanced and democratic practices [2]. Prefigurative politics could become a means to react to existing situations while envisioning desirable futures in participatory practices, aspects that can be addressed both through research and practice.

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