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# **COLLABORATIVE SOCIAL DESIGN WITH MEXICAN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

**CRITICAL CRAFT AND TRANSFORMATIVE  
PRACTICES**

Carmen Malvar





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Critical Craft and Transformative Practices

**Carmen Malvar**

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# Afterword

## Proximity and the Ethics of Engagement

*Barbara Adams*

As designers increasingly turn their efforts to altering conditions for those who are oppressed and made vulnerable by the systems that shape our world, stubborn questions arise around the ethics of engagement. Socially engaged projects seek meaningful change, yet often discourage dissent, reify privilege, remain agnostic about outcomes, and do little to alter larger, structural inequalities. Designers can easily exit projects deemed failures and write these off as learning experiences. Armed with empathy and expertise, but with little local knowledge, design practitioners often struggle to form equitable relationships with partners and collaborators. Moreover, most design-based efforts fail to decenter-dominant cosmologies to make room for a diversity of worldviews and ways of living in the world.

Designers have only recently taken up the issues, inequities, ineffectualness, injury related to and resulting from practices generally described as community engagement, social impact, and the like, asking how they might actively dismantle oppressive structures and systems. Notably, Carmen conducted her ethnographic and design work in Oaxaca during an unprecedented moment when practitioners began to seriously question design's oppressive history and harmful practices. As an ethnographer, Carmen was aware of the ways anthropologists have been engaged in this sort of self-critique for decades (if not longer). The reflexive turn of the mid-1980s prompted anthropologists to acknowledge their culpability in colonial projects, challenging the view that the ethnographer can objectively and unbiasedly study and equitably engage people from cultures different from their own. This interrogation of the discipline produced radical ontological, axiological, and epistemological shifts, marked by a growing awareness of the ways in which all social relationships are marked by power dynamics and of their accountability to their collaborators. Ethnographers continue to grapple with these issues while designers have only recently started to seriously address how structural and longstanding inequities both shape the knowledge produced about people and their worlds and how this guides design activities and interventions.

Many emergent paradigms attest to the ways the reflexive turn has entered design practices and processes. For example, pluriversal design<sup>1</sup> elaborates the



Zapatista slogan, “Queremos un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos.” In a world where many worlds fit, communities themselves lead design processes and control their own life projects, activating a “radical design imagination.”<sup>2</sup> In addressing social and ecological crises, pluriversal design underscores both interdependence and autonomy in world- and future-making. Similarly, advocates of transition design<sup>3</sup> urge practitioners to recognize the interconnectedness and interdependency of social, economic, political, and natural systems, calling for “cosmopolitan localism,” a site-specific approach where design activities are developed and tailored for local social and environmental conditions. Transition design aims for deep change, challenging existing paradigms, envisioning new ones, and demanding radical and equitable social and environmental transformation. Demands to decolonize design gained force in 2016<sup>4</sup> when a group of emerging design scholars released their manifesto calling for decolonization—as a practice—to orient all design activities to advance “ecological, social, and technological conditions where multiple worlds and knowledges, involving both humans and nonhumans, can flourish in mutually enhancing ways.”<sup>5</sup> More recently, discourse and practice have focused on steps toward design that is just, equitable, and collaborative, calling on creative practices to address the deepest challenges marginalized communities face.<sup>6</sup> Design justice, as a framework asks us to consider and act on the ways design distributes benefits and burdens and how the “matrix of domination” (white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, ableism, settler colonialism, and other forms of structural inequality) plays a role in this.<sup>7</sup> Justice-based design practice includes communities in meaningful participation in design decisions and recognizes and values community-based, indigenous, and diasporic design traditions, knowledge, and practices.<sup>8</sup>

This rough and incomplete recap provides just a brief sketch of recent issues framing the work of social designers today. This work is haunted by the legacy of white supremacy and framed by difficult questions and complex challenges. How can design practitioners work with people to develop new ethical orientations? (How) can social designers build alliances, solidarity, and equitable relationships with their collaborators—particularly when these relations are embedded in unjust systems? How might designers phase out the need for social design, making small yet significant changes in people’s lives while also working to transform broader overarching systems and structures? These questions are not rhetorical. They call for action-based design responses—a daunting task, given that even the notion of justice itself is oriented around Western conceptions of how we can best live together in (and with) the world.

In response to these pressing questions, Carmen offers an approach she calls “proximities of design.” This strategy acknowledges and develops the ways in which designers create situations and cultivate conditions where people can creatively build connections with other people, with place, with materials, and with individual and collective practices. This method, although functioning in a framed and designed environment, functions as a flexible system that adapts and



shifts through participation and collaboration. Carmen understands proximities of design as

a way to approach and contextualize in order to bring about dialogue among all participants, not only in a verbal way, but also through gestures, movements, situations and physical distance among people, or in the way that material is used, and artefacts are made.<sup>9</sup>

This capaciousness in terms of form, she argues, has the capacity to forge new understandings of identity and to foster practices of collaboration in creatively negotiating cultural differences.

Following Hannah Arendt (1958),<sup>10</sup> who argues that the designer, artist, and craftsman, as *homo faber*, create the things (material objects, stories, and other types of artifacts) that facilitate meaningful action, Carmen stresses the importance of making. In her work, she experiments with how processes of making can transform social, political, and economic situations, altering people's life chances. Arendt (1958) argues that human artifice (fabrication by human hands) provides a medium around which people can gather to create a world together. This notion, that through the process of making people can form connections and build worlds, is central to Carmen's collaborative work. Moreover, in being attuned to the embodied and performative aspects of making, Carmen recognizes how "voice" and expression are conveyed via human collective labor and in artifacts themselves. This experiential aspect poses provocative considerations for those working in participatory and social design fields. When, earlier this year, those who participated in the project were asked to reflect on the process, the statements were positive, yet not necessarily pithy. This points to a challenge for designers in terms of how to assess project-based work, even in those situations where the relationship is sustained over many years. Collaborators note significant improvements in their lives as a result of the project and the ongoing work of the CADA Foundation. They identify a better overall quality of life due to increased mobility, a sense of support, and a stable, living income. Their feedback is brief, leaving us to wonder how social designers might better invite critique from collaborators, holding design professionals accountable and responsible for the impacts (or lack thereof) of their work. Are there other tools, perhaps built into collaborative making processes themselves, that might facilitate evaluation and critique? What is outside our current perceptual orbit and how might this be expanded through collaboration with people from worlds that might be very different from our own?

The notion of "proximity," offers generative responses to these questions in terms of how we might catalyze creative forms of collaboration and critique. Carmen's use of "proximity" resonates with Deleuze's theorization of "the zone of proximity."<sup>11</sup> Here, there is an encounter with the other in a zone of creation where what emerges is not the possession of those in the encounter. Rather, creation is the shared event of becoming that is generated by proximity. In proximity, he asserts, we no longer occupy a stable identity but are folded into



movement and a position that is nomadic. This sounds like an interesting place for social designers and their collaborators to meet. In proximity, ossified identities and ways of acting are destabilized and give way to a nomadic approach with more freedom to take experimental and exploratory detours. Framed in this way, we might see “proximities of design” as an aspirational disposition where we are constantly striving to create situations and conditions for making other things sensible, creating new alliances and forms of action.

It’s been said that every new medium and technique is indicative of new social relationships.<sup>12</sup> If social design is to operate according to principles of justice and with a commitment to social, political, and economic transformation, the field needs new mediums and techniques. As social designers are increasingly driven to address social and political injustice, new methods and protocols are needed. This will involve taking stock of privilege, authority, and access and dispensing with deficit models. Frameworks that center damage or resilience function as failed theories of change.<sup>13</sup> These approaches ask individuals who are already exploited to bear the burden of change and preserve the conditions that create suffering in the first place. They position “communities” (a placeholder for those “in need” where oppression singularly defines people) as reliant on expert practitioners who function as benevolent helpers rather than dedicated allies working in solidarity to change institutional and structural inequalities. In shifting to practices of proximity as Carmen proposes, perhaps we can co-create conditions for participation that nurture relationships based in solidarity. In taking guidance from communities themselves, social designers can maintain a capacity to act, while being responsible for the consequences of acting. As Carmen notes, this is not a short-term endeavor, but an ongoing project that can move only at the speed of relationships themselves.

## Notes

- 1 Escobar, Arturo (2017) *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Duke.
- 2 Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*.
- 3 Irwin, Terry (2015) “Transition Design: A Proposal for a New Area of Design Practice, Study, and Research,” *Design and Culture*, 7(2): 229–246.
- 4 See: Decolonizing Design’s “Editorial Statement” on their website, June 27, 2016, [www.decolonisingdesign.com/statements/2016/editorial/](http://www.decolonisingdesign.com/statements/2016/editorial/), and their roundtable discussion, Tristan Schultz, Danah Abdulla, Ahmed Ansari, Ece Canlı, Mahmoud Keshavarz, Matthew Kiem, Luiza Prado de O. Martins & Pedro J.S.Vieira de Oliveira (2018) “What Is at Stake with Decolonizing Design?” *Design and Culture*, 10(1): 81–101.
- 5 Decolonizing Design, “Editorial Statement.”
- 6 See for example the work of the Design Justice Network (<https://designjustice.org/>) and Sasha Costanza-Chock’s book from 2020, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*, from MIT.
- 7 Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice*.
- 8 Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice*.



- 9 See “Proximities of Design” in Chapters 1 (pp. 22–23) and two (section 2.3).
- 10 Arendt, Hannah (1958) *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago.
- 11 Deleuze, Gilles (1997) “Literature and Life,” *Critical Inquiry* 23(2): 225–230.
- 12 Williams, Raymond (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. New York: Oxford.
- 13 See: Tuck, Eve (2009) “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities.” *Harvard Educational Review* 79(3): 409–427.

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Arendt, H. 1958. *The human condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.