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Design in the Pandemic: Dispatches from the Early Months

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Editors' Introduction

This special issue of *Design and Culture* emerged from a call released in May 2020 while we were still in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Noting that the pandemic had radically altered our relations with things, spaces, and one another, we called for dispatches that would register and articulate its immediate and unfolding experience. In particular, we wanted to pay attention to the dramatically deepening systemic social and geopolitical inequities and new territorial divides it created, seen through design perspectives, approaches, and sensibilities. Our editorial brief was not specifically geared to collect examples of design “solutions” to identifiable (and obvious) design “problems” related to the pandemic. Rather, we aimed to convey a more nuanced and expanded notion of design as a social sensitivity, critical lens, and proposition of tangible values

and aspirations. We were also interested in experiences from various subject positions, from those who spent the quarantine working or studying from home to essential workers and frontliners, aware that the virus was far from a “great equalizer” and that “risk is not equally distributed” (Jones 2020). In terms of format, we sought a variety of responses – from text to audio and visual work – that would capture the different affective and material dimensions of the pandemic experience.

The dispatches included in this issue capture a specific and not easily forgettable moment – the early part of the quarantine from January to June 2020 – when the pandemic affected large swaths of the planet. In collecting and editing these responses, our approach was guided by the notion that these unprecedented circumstances bear witness to design’s capacity to question, reimagine, amplify, and give tangible form to what, in a specific given moment, impacts the ways we live and relate. Therefore, this special issue concentrates on the immediate implications of the pandemic for the many worlds we inhabit and the various ways lives and materialities were transformed in response to the pandemic’s emergence. It also captures some of the myriad acts of care and improvisation that emerged in the early stages of the pandemic – acts that might be naturalized or forgotten as we continue to adapt to an ever-changing situation. The following assemblage of articles, sound explorations, photo/video essays, interviews, and conversations functions as a sort of a time-capsule of “pandemic matters,” a portal into variously situated ways of grappling with the pandemic – where individual, personal, domestic micro-practices intersect with and impact the social, the technological, and the political. While these voices may not necessarily resonate as a harmonious score, they offer a poignant account of how COVID-19 was variously experienced in its early stages.

In our collection of dispatches, we solicited works from both the global north and the global south. They originate from various national contexts starting from those in which we as the three coeditors were situated – New York and London – and expanding to other regions and countries: Vancouver, Canada; urban and rural Brazil; Athens, Greece; China; and Hong Kong. In the process of reviewing and revising, we were careful to not alter the immediacy of the dispatches by mixing early views and emotions with later reflections. In some cases, retrospection is provided as postscript.

Stories from the Early Pandemic Days: A Design Lens

Blurring scholarly analysis and personal testimony, the following dispatches bear witness to the material and affective domains of social life during the early months of the pandemic. The pandemic challenged the materiality of life as we knew it, creating new domains of the sensible that brought into view human and non-human actors that were previously invisible or neglected—essential workers,

**Figure 1**

Echoes of Absence, Fall 2020, Paris © Erieta Attali.

pathogens, radios. Some accounts are based on personal explorations and auto-ethnographic observations, while others arose from efforts to listen to and hear from others at a moment when familiar modes of communication were fundamentally altered. They explore encounters, interventions, or circumstances in the realm of the technical, material, or corporeal that attest to the changes and uncertainties, both subtle and profound, caused by the pandemic. Moreover, they speak to the possibilities for new configurations and change. These communiqués also offer insights into the consequential changes that designers now must consider as the context for their work, becoming more attentive to the precarity of essential work, the processes of social reproduction, and the “fissures” of the society which the virus affected the most.

Despite its invisibility, the image of the virus has been omnipresent, and this is the result of deliberate design decisions. “Pandemic politics can be gauged and reset visually,” claims political and visual studies scholar Victoria Hattam. Rather than taking for granted the scientific objectivity of the virus’ representations, Hattam discusses the affects of its various visualizations. She finds that the red and grey rendering from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) that gained prominence in the US intentionally alludes to military tropes, unlike softer images created by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) that might convey an idea of “living with” rather than a “quarantining from” the virus.

The act of designing, by professional designers and non-professionals alike, found immediate deployment in the healthcare sector. Amidst shortages of basic protections, frontline workers devised ad hoc solutions to address the life or death conditions of their work environment. Issues of spatial and material reorganization in health-care facilities are discussed in an interview with Dr. Efiie Galiatsou, an ITU doctor at a London hospital, as well as in a conversation with Denise Mistein from Columbia University who collected rapid response oral histories from healthcare workers. Designers Julia Benini, Ezio Manzini, and Lesh Parameswaran reflect on horizontal and hybrid systems of care that emerged in Barcelona during the pandemic and how these can be scaled up in the future. They argue that “designing for enhanced territoriality and decentralized caring systems might help empower communities to be more actively involved in the future of care provision” beyond the current pandemic. In a related vein, Marcos Martins, a designer and educator at Brazil’s ESDI school, chronicles his and his students’ design of the digital version of the COVID-19 Case Record Form for collecting data



Figure 2
East Village Home, New York, April 13, 2020. From the series “Covid Nights.”
Photography courtesy of Alice Arnold.

of suspected or diagnosed cases. Amid chaotic conditions, this undertaking revealed how designing involved “micropolitical agency” as “an antidote to the government’s campaign for neglect, denial, and carelessness.” These dispatches offer just a glimpse into the enormous, often uncoordinated but converging efforts of people from different professions, from first respondents to designers, in reshaping the material dimensions of health care provision.

For those who spent the lockdown at home, domestic and neighborly environments acquired new dimensions, and the notion of the hyper-local emerged as a new locus of their lifeworld (as in the images included here, [Figures 1–3](#)). Work from home brought an ambivalent combination of “social isolation with a surplus of connectivity and communication” (Arruzza and Mometti 2020). Adams and Milstein reflect on the social and emotional effects of adaptations in the domestic environment to accommodate an unprecedented amount of domestic labor and density of activities, both in the physical and virtual domains. At the same time home confinement accentuated sensorial learning and our relations with the “thingly world,” as shown in several multimedia dispatches. Selena Kimball and Pascal Glissmann, design educators and founders of the *Observational Practices Lab*, show in their visual essay how objects “have taken on new meaning since the start of [the] isolation.” Perceptual shifts in the domestic environment are also the subject of the video essay by Frankie Yu, an interior designer who performs an autoethnography of her own home while in confinement. Rain, light, the warmth of the sunlight, and other environmental conditions that might have been left unnoticed before are captured by her home’s surfaces – walls, window panes, mirrors – as new focal points for the change of weather and time, and the affective cascade they create.

Locked-down residents, in their limited outdoor pursuits, explored their localities with a new mindset. As his “world shrank,” Marcus Bastel, a professional photographer, gets “to know every other tree in his neighborhood.” In addition to forging affinities with nature, he engages in “invent[ing] locations” during his daily walks in East London, where he unexpectedly sees “Louisiana” or “São Paulo” in the familiar landscape. Sound practitioner Helena Krobath explores her auditory connection to the outside world while quarantined in her gentrifying Vancouver neighborhood and finds herself “listening for danger.” She registers the wobbling sound of wheeled carts, as can pickers, left out of the country’s welfare provision, replace the beer drinkers that frequented the district before. The sounds of their labor attests to the precariousness of their lives, and this, together with the sound of the ambulances, brings an eerie alteration to the neighborhood’s soundscape.

The pandemic reconfigured education. Students and teachers had to adapt to the new pedagogical modalities of remote learning, often with limited resources or support. Dispatches from Lauren Suiter and Emily Franklin, along with that from Martins, reflect on

how students and faculty in two different contexts – a private university in New York, a state university in Brazil – coped with these changes. Graduating students, already grappling with the completion of their degree and the new technologies of community-making imposed by the quarantine, faced a collapsing economy as newly-credentialed design practitioners. Martins discusses how the “intermittent and fluctuating pattern of student attendance and attention” in Rio de Janeiro did not compromise the educational experience. Rather the process of “learning through doing together” provoked a deeper critical attitude in the students, and a reversal of the conventional students’ and teachers’ roles, providing lessons that need not be restricted to exceptional circumstances.

The transition to remote learning also revealed deep divides in terms of digital accessibility, among numerous other inequities. As huge gaps in the social net were exposed and left unmet, communities mobilized to self-manage their own resources. Architecture scholar Laura Belik looks at the radio as a tactical medium used by urban and rural communities in Brazil both for educational purposes and for the delivery of information. She finds that radio is not just a response to digital inequities but also an active tool of resistance to Bolsonaro’s anti-knowledge regime. Similar processes of self-managed resources and solidarity, such as mutual aid programs, have mushroomed around the globe “often coming from within struggling communities, empowering those aided, and with an eye towards liberation and social change” (Solnit 2020). Cultural geographer Penny Travlou, in an autoethnographic dispatch, provides a first-hand account of the work of Kropotkin 19, a mutual aid initiative in Athens that offered food, essential goods, and legal and psychological support to those in need. Kropotkin 19 remobilized the “affective infrastructures” that were originally organized as a response to Greece’s austerity measures in response to ongoing economic crisis. In these “novel forms of participatory citizenship” in the European south, Travlou glimpses the possibility of an alternative future, beyond a return to pre-pandemic normality.

Our collection of dispatches ends in June 2020, just as the protests that followed the murder of George Floyd were beginning in Minneapolis. The spirit of citizens’ revolt against totalitarianism and other forms of political repression in the context of COVID-19 is the subject of two dispatches from East Asia. In a visual essay, designer Ruimin Ma examines Chinese netizens’ creative resistance to the government’s censorship of news about the death of Dr. Li in Wuhan in February 2020 and the identification of the new virus. Across WeChat, citizen reporters eluded online censorship through creative means. For example, a red slash above the textual dissemination of the news on Li’s death (which appears on this special issue’s cover) acted as a visual intervention that tricked the AI censors, offering a symbol of civil disobedience. Similar tactics of graphic activism in China’s social media showed the public’s unwillingness to accept



Figure 3

“Senda sin peatón.” Buenos Aires, Argentina. April, 12, 2020.
Photography courtesy of Tomas Mor.

the government’s suppression of information. Design researcher Kyle Kwok’s dispatch links the act of mask-wearing in the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong with DIY acts of making, wearing, and disseminating masks during the pandemic. To Kwok, masks are “a new global sociocultural symbol of COVID-19, simultaneously representing those who struggle to protect themselves from the virus and rally against politically repressive regimes,” drawing a convergence between two distinct forms of global resistance.

These dispatches register the experiences of a variety of demographics: urban and rural populations; essential workers at the front line and professionals able to work from home; individuals who offered support as healthcare workers, educators, and designers; communities acting in solidarity through processes of resource self-management and mutual aid; and citizens protesting various forms of repression. For some the pandemic was experienced as a suspension of quotidian activities; for others it involved trauma, grief, economic precarity, and fear. For yet others, the challenges posed by the pandemic offered opportunities for collective, commoning work that transcended “the limitations and the market worshipping cynicism of contemporary capitalism” (Stavrides 2020) – work that might ameliorate the underlying and inequitable conditions now laid bare.

Activists from Black Lives Matter to the Extinction Rebellion to myriad local mutual aid groups worldwide continue to demand change for more equitable and sustainable futures while enacting radical forms of care. Response to contagion disclosed the capacity for immediate and deep systemic change. Almost overnight we saw events that would have been unimaginable before: the widespread use of and demand for masks, sheltering in place, travel bans, social distancing, increased work from home, the reduction of consumption, decarceration, eviction bans, the temporary lessening of

emissions – even “peacocks dancing at traffic crossings” (Roy 2020). Of course, not all these changes are enduring and sustainable; nor were they necessarily performed in socially just ways. Nonetheless, they attest to the capacity to alter institutionalized practices, habits, and values – even those that seem the most inflexible – if there is collective will and commitment.

Seeing that socio-material change can occur on this scale, at this pace, and with this degree of collectivity, designers might ask how to leverage and activate their figurative capacity for creating new ways of being in order to contribute to longer-term social transformations. Designers might be able to show that “thing-making” and “life-making” (Bhattacharya 2020) are complementary forces, and that making things with care is indispensable both for more just modes of production and distribution and for giving dignity and value to life itself. It might be that through the joined forces of social movement and (un)design—both courses of action propelled by a commitment to change—new critical imaginaries and roadmaps will be configured for a more just transition to the post-pandemic era.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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