

CRAFTING CAPACITIES

Barbara Adams

In 1958, the sociologist C. Wright Mills addressed the International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado. Mills encouraged designers to act not as adjuncts to the commercial apparatus but to understand themselves as agents of change and as critics who craft the physical frame of private and public life.¹ Mills was prescient in recognizing the central values that have emerged in design practice—the virtue of dialogue across fields, the significance of social collaboration, and the importance of craft in shaping the future. This understanding of craft is echoed in the essays that follow. Here, craft is understood expansively to mean a fundamentally social way of working with people through the medium and intelligence of materiality. With the arrival of smart materials that fuse artificial intelligence with the native intelligence of metals, fibers, and synthetics via sensors, microprocessors, and photovoltaics, materiality also includes composites of pixels and bytes and the flows of electrical current. The line between the ephemeral and the solid, between the natural and the artificial, has long since disappeared. As media scholar Anne Balsamo puts it, “Designers work the scene of technological emergence: they hack the present to create the conditions of the future.”²

Richard Barnes, Nest #13 *Gabula Singularis*, 2000. Courtesy Richard Barnes.



Craftsmanship, Mills maintained, is deeply tied to the sociological imagination that considers the ways in which individual biographies are related to larger histories, the ways in which personal concerns are related to broader social issues. Those who engage the sociological imagination (and Mills encouraged designers to do so) place their society historically and look at how it moves in its particular period.³ Moreover, they seek possibilities for change by cultivating images of what society might become.⁴ Craft is a way of activating our knowledge of social behaviors and desires, in the context of time and place, through work. For the craftsman, plan and performance are unified through an experience of working that is characterized by iteration, exchange, and continuous learning. The work of the craftsman is poetic in the sense that people cooperate with materials to prompt processes that are both expressive and productive, opening other ways of knowing and engaging the world. As such, craft harbors the capacity to create aesthetic experiences that allow us to comprehend more than just our present condition. Encompassing both process and product, this way of working allows us to imagine and initiate that which has not yet taken shape.

The practices and projects discussed in this section of *Design as Future-Making* embrace similar understandings of craft. They illuminate craft's capacities to create networked ways of working, to engage a range of publics, and to foster critical temperaments and disciplinary reflexivity. They generate novel forms of social relations—coproduced by and with spatial, material, and digital resources. Most vitally, they nurture opportunities for agency. Hierarchies are eschewed in favor of shared space in which mentoring, skill transference, and mutual discovery are the a priori values of the workshop. The negotiative and performative capacities of design are explored through systems that enable creativity and foster skill, through digital crafting that underscores the material logics of making, and through the use of design to raise and address troubling ethical and philosophical questions. Design in these instances is entrusted as a way to think and construct knowledge through fabrication. More than that, it opens forums for meaningful action.

The projects and provocations discussed in *Crafting Capacities* assert that design may be less about creating objects for subjects and more about crafting subjectivities themselves, without forgetting that those subjects interact with things that either inhibit or evoke possibilities for them on a daily basis. Designed and made things are understood as densities of cultural values and historical memories. They communicate and are endowed with the capacity to perform as animate agents imbued with the values of their makers. There is a mutuality of creation in which materials have as much affect as people do. Where architect

Louis Kahn famously asked “what the brick wants to be,” now designers and architects ask how the proverbial brick might behave.⁵ Today, designers have the capacity to collaborate not only with a wide range of constituencies and communities but also with things in all their vitality, with things in different social and material contexts. These alliances, as Deleuze argues, nurture the movement of thought that can lead to action:

Mediators are fundamental. Creation is all about mediators. Without them, nothing happens. They can be people—artists or scientists for a philosopher; philosophers or artists for a scientist—but things as well, even plants and animals. . . . Whether they’re real or imaginary, animate or inanimate, one must form one’s mediators. It’s a series: if you don’t belong to a series, even a completely imaginary one, you’re lost . . . one is always working in a group, even when it doesn’t appear to be the case.⁶

The authors in *Crafting Capacities* see mediation as fundamental and think seriously about the redistribution of knowledge and how we might develop new vocabularies for thinking via design processes. This section of the book asks how design might traverse the capacities of work and action. Hannah Arendt maintains that work is worldliness and involves the capabilities necessary to negotiate with nature in order to design and produce the artificial things that house our lives and legacies. Action, she avers, is the activity between the plurality of people that constitutes the public and political realm. When we act and speak, we set in motion an “agent-revealing capacity” that allows us to see who people are (versus simply what people are) and to negotiate, yet maintain, our differences to establish a shared reality from which we might actualize our capacity for freedom.

In order to recognize the identities of people or to establish shared histories or to experience togetherness, Arendt argues that we need storytellers. In the essays that follow, we see how design engages the narrative and performative qualities that might create public realms where people act and speak together. As Arendt notes, these spaces are fragile and ephemeral, dissolving each time people disperse. Thus, the public realm is an ongoing project where the forum for dialogue is created and recreated each time people assemble to establish relations and create new realities.⁷ This process is based in action, yet it does not render making insignificant. Although Arendt claims that action goes on “directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter,”⁸ she also notes that *homo faber* (for our purposes, the designer who adopts the ethos of craft) has the ability to create a durable world of things that

connect those who have it in common.⁹ Human affairs need human artifice to house them:

[A]cting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all. In order to be what the world is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech.¹⁰

One of the capacities of craft is to create a home not only for the world in which we live but also to consider how to house the yet-to-come. This raises overwhelming and recalcitrant questions about of how we inhabit the world, questions that need to be considered relationally. Whereas Arendt saw *homo faber* working in isolation, the authors in this section imagine the work of making differently. Here, design is initiated outside conventional contexts in an expanded field of new alignments—with people, with nature, with things, with technologies—that open new possibilities for what can be made and done. This quality is characteristic of the boundlessness and natality of action. In blending artifice and action—in construing making as another form of action—the authors in this section redefine users as actors and recognize vitality in the material. In doing so, they create new platforms for mediation that not only accommodate the future but cultivate active, public participation in how the future takes shape.

DESIGN AS FUTURE-MAKING

UP-ENDING SYSTEMS

Barbara Adams

8c85d4798b6b6db6013dadf1c52b96b9
ebrary

DESIGN AS FUTURE-MAKING

This section of *Design as Future-Making* in many ways mirrors the first. The activities of making and acting that are central to crafting capacities are equally important in upending systems. But making and acting are complicated by contemporary confusion about and within systems themselves. As the authors in this section contend, our current conditions are not adequately served by the systems in place. This concern has been broadly theorized across a wide range of disciplines. For example, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman tells us the inherited frameworks that organize our ways of relating in and to the world are disintegrating in the face of “the new lightness and fluidity of the increasingly mobile, slippery, shifty evasive, and fugitive [strongholds of] power.”¹ Anthropologist Michael Taussig argues that we now experience a doubleness of social being, in which we oscillate between normalcy and panic as part of “a nervous system” that changes shape just as we think we have gotten hold of it.² And literary critic Fredric Jameson points out how difficult it is in the context of global capitalism “to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which humans normally orient themselves.”³ But we needn’t only turn to theory to see that existing systems are becoming more and more difficult to sustain and navigate—we can simply open the newspaper or reflect on our own experiences and participation in the world.

8c85d4798b6b6db6013dadf1c52b96b9
ebrary

8c85d4798b6b6db6013dadf1c52b96b9
ebrary



8c85d4798b6b6db6013dadf1c52b96b9
ebruary

Mishka Henner, Ammunition Depot in Staphorst, Overijssel, 2011. From the series *Dutch Landscapes*.
Courtesy Mishka Henner.

With a palpable sense of our situation as precarious and our condition as one in which risk is omnipresent, we respond in a variety of ways including denial, apathy, and transformation.⁴ Tremors of transformation can be felt when we push at, and sometimes through, the limits of existing systems. From Wikileaks to the recent protests in Turkey and throughout the Middle East to the creative tactics we deploy to negotiate the everyday forces of order that confront us—tactics like sharing and bartering not just goods but also intellectual and social capital—we reveal systems as partial and always incomplete. These transformative efforts show how the various elements of a system exist as uncoordinated potentialities until they are organized and mobilized via some form of action so that they might function in a particular relational scheme. Systems, understood in this way, are prone to change. They are more than the codes and rules and inputs that constitute the infrastructure—they are rich with unanticipated associations, confluences, and circuitry. This opens the possibility for upending systems where seemingly ossified schemas might be delinked through heretical propositions that depart from standardized and ritualized ways of doing.

Yet the rigidity of systems stands in tense relation to this more pliant stance. Accordingly, designers are discovering that the secret to negotiating this tension might be less about confronting the rigidity of rules and more about changing tack. Consider Do Tank, a laboratory initiated by New York Law School, where digital interfaces are designed to help examine “the role of legal and political institutions, social and business practices . . . not only to foster community, but to take action.”⁵ In other words, to develop a culture of civic participation. This approach is also evident in the work of DESIS (Design for Social Innovation toward Sustainability), an international network of design labs, which emphasizes scenario building to promote social and environmental sustainability. Their focus on the design of public policy asks people to engage in social learning projects that generate new relationships and practices.

Design strategist and coordinator of DESIS Ezio Manzini sees design as a catalyst that can activate the cooperative invention of alternative scenarios—from cohousing to urban farming—that are small, local, open, connected, and rich with the capacity to skirt normative systems and their failures.⁶ On a quite different scale, the European Commission has turned to design to rethink the public sector with Sharing Experience Europe (SEE), a platform that touts design thinking and practice as “the way to overcome common structural flaws in service provision and policymaking.”⁷ The design consultancy IDEO, through both its for-profit and nonprofit divisions, has also worked closely with the public sector to rethink entrenched bureaucratic practices from the work visa process in Singapore to voting participation in Peru to filing for social security benefits in the United States.⁸

Practices such as these tend to de-emphasize finite solutions in the interest of generating questions. What is design's role in our ability to inaugurate new forms of dwelling in the world? How can design assist in the navigation of current systems and the initiation of new imaginaries? How can design participate in disaggregating the systems in place and challenging what computer scientist and critic Jaron Lanier calls their "locked-in" nature?⁹ How is it possible for design to create passage where there has been none, to open and extend action into time? The gestures and negotiations advanced in *Up-Ending Systems* address these dilemmas; they creatively corrupt fixed forms of production and unmoor the normative practices and philosophies that underwrite design. These authors interrogate the assumptions embedded in such fundamental concepts as scale, speed, nature, and artifice. In the process, they reveal how design is implicated in changing our inner clocks, in affecting consumption and waste, in allowing access to information, and in creating or inhibiting equitable access to resources for survival. They mark points of change, indicate crises, and engage convertible, incomplete landscapes that present uncertainty, risk, and error. In doing so, these authors resignify politics, place, practice, and person through the lens of design. Stressing potential over possibility,¹⁰ the essays in this section of *Design as Future-Making* relinquish rote models and modules in favor of openness to unlikely alliances, unexpected connections, and always the possibility of transformation.

Attunement to futurity is requisite for upending systems. When framed as attunement, design rejects the impotence experienced by the angel of history who was unable to look away from the wreckage and catastrophes of the past to see where he is headed.¹¹ Beyond attunement, our condition requires that a commitment to futurity be demonstrated in meaningful action. Once in motion, action has no end and, as a result, poses risk and uncertainty that recall the fragility of the human condition. This activity is heavy with consequences and responsibilities. In spite of the uncontrollability of provoking action, designers are increasingly being called upon to contribute their particular knowledge and experience to the hornet's nest of contemporary crises exacerbated by the habitual default to obsolete systems. They are also being asked to anticipate the consequences of their work in admittedly unstable conditions. For example, in the face of wasteful systems of production, distribution, consumption, and elimination, philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek asks designers to consider the sensorial aspects of using products (not just their emissions or material mass) as a way of changing the temporal dynamics of product cycles and as one way of addressing the environmental crisis.¹²

The authors in this section of the book do not say we should, or could, launch a wholesale overhaul of existing systems. Rather, they present lateral

moves. Acting on systems, as understood in the essays that follow, involves critical gestures that conjure new stories. These stories reimagine how a narrative might move from point to point and recast who might act as a protagonist. As Otto von Busch points out, “world-building is also about producing infrastructure, rules, and culture for a fictional world; the ludic parameters for shared imagination, the world in which explorative *paideia* is let loose.”¹³ Because systems regulate the vantage points from which we view the world, it can be easy to forget that there are alternate ways of world-building in this sense.

Elucidating the inequities suffered when such alternatives are muted, unexplored, or unrecognized, philosopher Jacques Rancière explores the limitations of the audible and visible within political and aesthetic regimes. He is concerned with what can be apprehended by the senses, how that which is sensible is distributed, and how this defines the extent of what we can know, how we think, and what we can experience.¹⁴ According to Rancière, social and political order is founded on the distribution of the sensible. Some groups and ideas can be sensed (heard, seen, etc.), while others remain outside sensibility. By “undoing and rearticulating the connections between signs and images, images and times, or signs and space that frame the existing sense of reality,”¹⁵ we can remap our cartographies of perception and see systems differently. Reshaping systems of visibility, according to Rancière, involves inventing fictions that have the capacity to create new alliances and forms of action. “Fiction invents new communities of sense: that is to say, new trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said, and what can be done.”¹⁶ The essays that follow seek to redistribute frames of visibility and patterns of intelligibility that can generate new communities of sense.

We seem to be at an impasse. We understand that the classic coordinates of our most familiar systems—our understanding of time, space, identity—were staked out in another context, yet we continue to orient ourselves using these conceptual points (which can only take us off course). If it is true, as Hannah Arendt argues, that the modern age shifted our perception of the human condition from wonder to doubt, from frailty to uncertainty,¹⁷ then how might design reckon with this state of affairs? Arendt offers a tentative response: “The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action.”¹⁸ The essays that follow advance action that interrupts and upends fraught systems.