



# Designing things together: intersections of co-design and actor-network theory

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## EDITORIAL

### **Designing things together: intersections of co-design and actor–network theory**

This special issue brings together nine papers that explore in different ways the interesting space at the intersection of co-design and actor–network theory.<sup>1</sup> The papers consolidate a tradition of multidisciplinary design research with contributions from science and technology studies (STS) in which design is seen as a social and political activity playing a vital role in the shaping of our societies. Design is becoming less confined to the design studio with well-identified stakeholders. It takes new forms as public interventions and as explorations ‘in the wild’. This means that it becomes more difficult to understand the scope and limits of design interventions and, therefore design research needs new tools to address and reflect these changes. Similarly, actor-network theory (ANT) has moved out of its traditional concern with STS that is critical of modernist separations (such as object/subject and nature/culture), to a concern with reassembling the social and building a common world, where democratic, ecological and political issues permeate everyday life, and design and technology are an integral part of it.

*Designing things together* has become for us as editors, a label to identify this overlap between co-design and ANT and to support a shared agenda towards technical democracy that helps us to further ‘unpack’ the co- in co-design. The papers in this issue look at a series of intersecting topics and, even if they approach and use ANT in different ways, they all contribute to a more systematic exploration of how to design things together. The authors are concerned with the relationship between design and democracy (Binder et al., Storni), participation (Palmas and Von Busch; Andersen et al.), making things public (Schoffelen et al.; Stuedahl and Smørðal), new collective forms of design experiments (Tironi and Laurent; Lindstrom and Stahl), and new ways to look at and talk about co-design (Akama).

The papers reaffirm a non-modern way of thinking about co-design that is critical of the idea of the designer as a hero (or user as a king), the idea of participation being unproblematic or taken for granted, the clear-cut opposition between design and use (designer and user, design and research), the idea of design objects as stand-alone outcomes, or that of collaborating entities pre-existing the design process.

This special issue opens with two research papers that view ANT as a means of rethinking collaborative design practices towards a design democracy. Binder et al discuss how ANT can reinvigorate participatory design as democratic design experiments between parliament and laboratory. Critical of the obsession with objects dominant in design and of human-centeredness, the authors articulate the idea of designing ‘things’ as socio-material assemblies of public concerns and issues that evolve over time. Addressing Latour’s call for co-habitation, Storni proposes a translation of ANT from an STS tool to produce risky accounts, to a design tool to design things together. In this translation, Storni proposes three turns for design: ontological, methodological and epistemological. The first argues for the design of actor networks. The second suggests designing by means of actor networking in public, and thus calls for a much-needed cartography of co-design. The third suggests moving from the idea of the designer as the prince of a network to the designer as

an agnostic Prometheus. Drawing on the mapping controversies programme, Schoffelen et al explore how visualizations in co-design can facilitate participation. Acknowledging the need to make the design process more visible and public, the authors focus on how such visualizations can be both transparent and readable. Through a series of case studies, the authors discuss three aspects of such visualizations: how they make the process more engaging, how they support sense-making and how they facilitate reflection. In their studies, they contribute to a better understanding of design that address ANT's call for making things public. With similar concerns and drawing on the classic ANT notion of translation, Stuedahl and Smørðal discuss a design case where the authors and museum staff explore new ways of making a museum and its artefacts more public through social media. They stress the importance of developing experimental zones where design is about learning and developing over time. In this way, they offer a view of co-design as a matter of developing (together) and show how making things public is about transforming matters of concern within experimental zones. Different forms of design experiments are also the main focus of the two following research papers by Tironi and Laurent, and Lindstrom and Stahl, although with two rather different case studies. Tironi and Laurent discuss a case of what they call an experimental mode of industrial innovation. More than 30 years after Callon's work on the electric engine, the authors report on the *Twizy Way*, an initiative exploring a new electric car-sharing system by Renault that turned a small French town into a test and demonstration laboratory. They show how the *Twizy Way* was indeed co-designed but not according to Renault's original design as several unexpected participants became co-experimenters. In this way, they challenge traditional separations (public and private sector, inside and outside of a company, designer and user) and show the uncontrolled nature of such large experiments. Lindstrom and Stahl offer a discussion of a completely different design experiment. After reviewing and critically discussing several STS figurations and their politics, the authors discuss the ANT-inspired figuration of *patch-working*. They do so by drawing on the travelling exhibition *Threads – a Mobile Sewing Circle* in which participants are invited to embroider text messages by hand or with a sewing machine. By stressing the performative nature of patchworking, they stress that co-design is about gatherings and issues (both plural) and propose a design approach to accommodate participation in open-ended processes. The notion of participation is the focus in the two papers that follow. Both offer a critique of the more traditional notion of participation that takes it for granted, or uncritically links it with democracy. Palmas and Von Busch draw on a post-political approach to show how participation is often used to legitimize the power and political agendas of elites. In discussing an urban planning case study, they argue that ANT might be used as a powerful tool to make explicit the democratic deficiencies of co-design practices. They show how the interests of participants may be betrayed, not simply as a result of some participants having stronger voices, but as a result of material modes of participation, what they label *quasi-quisling*. Andersen et al also focus on the notion of participation and offer what they call a realistic view of participation. From an ANT perspective, they see participation as a matter of concern as it can be 'overtaken' by numerous and often unexpected actors in participatory processes. They base their argument on their experience of a project concerned with the development of a tele-dialogue system for social workers. During the project, they used ANT to 'unpack' participants as networks of heterogeneous material, and in the process they highlight three key challenges for PD: participants become network configurations, participation partially exists in all elements of a project and, third, there is no gold standard for participation.

This special issue concludes with a contribution from Akama. Applying the Japanese philosophy of *Ma*, she focuses on the in-between-ness of co-design. Linking *Ma* with Latour's plasma, she brings our attention to the empty spaces of a network, the unsaid, unseen, not yet formatted and liminal. In doing so, she offers an interesting view of co-design, but also experiments with a style of writing sensitive to *Ma* that addresses Latour's call to develop a style of writing achieving realism 'on matters of concern'.

Before leaving the reader to peruse this special issue, we would like to thank the many who have made this possible. First of all, our thanks to the long list of reviewers who have made this experience extremely rewarding for all of us and who have made this editorial work possible: Carl DiSalvo, Casper Bruun Jensen, Christian Dindler, Christina Mörberg, Christopher LeDantec, Connie Svabo, Eric Monteiro, Giorgio De Michelis, Ignacio Farias, Judith Gregory, Lars Bo Andersen, Lone Malmberg, Mette Agger Eriksen, Mike Michael, Monica Buscher, Neah Kumar, Noortje Marres, Ole Smørødal, Pelle Ehn, Peter Danhold, Peter Lauritsen, Pirjo Elovaara, Sisse Finken, Sissel Olander, Tommaso Venturini. We would also like to thank the chief editor of the co-design journal, Janet McDonnell, who from our very first contact in 2012 has always been supportive and extremely helpful throughout the process.

#### Note

1. In response to our original call ([www.tandf.co.uk/journals/cfp/ncdncfp.pdf](http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/cfp/ncdncfp.pdf)) acknowledging an interesting space at the intersection of co-deign and actor-network theory, we received 68 expressions of interest. Expressions of interest came from very disparate areas: design schools, fine arts, architecture and urban studies, communication and media, computer science, public policy, pedagogy, philosophy, medicine and health, information and business schools. Contributions came from Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Japan, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the UK and the USA. We invited 23 authors to submit full papers and we received 16 papers. After two rounds of three reviews, nine works came through the process and are presented here.

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