Session I

Design as Social Activity

Social Design Approaching Social Work: On the Potential Interrelationships

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Abstract

Social design has a remarkable similarity to social work, particularly in its shared focus on addressing clients' problems and formulating strategies to solve them. When social design shifts its focus from physical objects to creating systems, events, and communities, it becomes even more like social work. However, despite these strong parallels, there is often a lack of mutual understanding, possibly due to their different labels. First, this paper aims to explore the historical intersection of social design with social work, particularly in the context of a community-based approach. It will also argue that social design can draw valuable insights from the extensive experience of social work, particularly in intervention theories, as designers also find themselves in the role of outsiders. In addition, the paper will explore the potential contributions of social design to the field of social work. While social design can act as a field of planning that promotes social innovation, it also has the capacity to infuse aesthetic qualities not only into products, but also into all activities aimed at addressing social problems. When social activities are inherently appealing, individuals are more likely to actively participate and work together towards common goals. Creating an environment that fosters enjoyment contributes significantly to the long-term success of social initiatives.

Keywords: *Social Design; Community Design; Social Work; Community; Aesthetics*

Introduction

Awareness of social design only grew as the social responsibility of designers was closely examined, especially as the negative impact of commercial design became more apparent in the second half of the 20th century. It wasn't until the beginning of the 21st century that the term 'social design' gained widespread recognition. Today, social design is generally understood as a form of creative practice that prioritizes addressing social issues over the pursuit of profit as a primary goal.

Social design can be compared to social work when it is about addressing clients' problems and developing strategies to solve them. When social design shifts its focus from practical tools to creating systems, events, and communities, it becomes even more like social work. However, despite their strong similarities, these two fields often lack mutual understanding, perhaps due to their different labels. This paper aims to explore the historical intersection of social design with social work, what social design can learn from social work and what it can contribute to the field of social work.

Three Stages of Social Design Development

At first glance, the debate around social design seems vibrant. Even without the term social design, there are numerous methodologies and case studies addressing various social problems. However, social design has not been recognized as a field for a long time, and because of its nature of trying to solve immediate problems, the history of social design has not been well described. While awareness of social design began to grow in the second half of the 20th century, discussions of social design often refer to figures such as William Morris, which requires an acknowledgement of the 19th century context when delving into the history of social design. For this reason, I have already proposed a three-stage model for tracing the development of social design. I will first review this model. (1)

The first stage of social design involves a contemplation of society with the aim of creating aesthetically pleasing products as a response to labor-related problems. In the Western countries of the 19th century, two different interests coexisted. On the one hand, charity workers were driven by the urgency of addressing the labor problems caused by rapid industrialization and the impoverishment of urban workers. On the other, artists, craftsmen and architects devoted their talents to creating beautiful decorations. In 19th century England, however, John Ruskin played a key role in bridging these two different interests. He saw human work in the craftsmanship of Gothic artisans and celebrated the beauty of ornament created by human labor (2). Later, William Morris took up the challenge of translating Ruskin's ideals into practical reality (3).

The second stage of social design marks a clear awareness of its contribution to society, with a focus on creating what is truly essential, while reassessing designers' responsibility for excessive consumption (4). With the spread of mass production systems in the second half of the 20th century, industrial design became a recognized profession. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, as environmental concerns gained recognition and issues of social justice, particularly between North and South, came to the fore, questions arose about the social responsibility of industrial designers. Towards the end of the 20th century, industrial designers began to change their perspective. They began to actively seek to create environmentally sustainable products and those that directly addressed social issues.

The most influential book during this period was Victor Papanek's 1971 book 'Design for the Real World' (5). The book was critical of commercial designers for designing luxuries for a handful of rich people while neglecting the essential needs of the majority. Papanek argues that industrial and advertising designers often show indifference to areas that are not economically profitable, failing to contribute to the real needs of people in areas such as labor, education, health, and welfare. Papanek shows creations such as a brazier made from a number plate, an irrigation pump made from old tires and a transport vehicle assembled from an old bicycle.

The third stage of social design is about actively shaping society itself, with a focus on rebuilding broken social bonds to improve people's quality of life. Even when the infrastructure is in place to improve people's lives, it must be maintained by local communities. Similarly, it's not enough to create convenient tools for social care; it's vital that people can use them effectively. In the 21st century, designers have become aware that the scope of design extends beyond physical objects. They recognize that their main task is now to create social systems, to initiate workshops and to foster cooperation.

The third stage of social design revolves around Ryō Yamazaki. He openly defines his work as 'community design' (6), emphasizing that it's not about creating physical things. Instead, he sees his work as a means of connecting people. Originally trained in landscape design, he realized the importance of people's care in maintaining designed spaces such as parks and shifted his focus to the crucial task of nurturing communities in need. The concept of community design seems to have little recognition outside Japan, and its development has been strongly influenced by his own experiences. Within the field of social design, community design is often seen as an attempt to

address social problems. However, Yamazaki offers a different perspective, seeing community design primarily as a task of fostering cooperative relationships between individuals, empowering them to tackle challenges independently. In essence, cooperation between people is an informal relationship that cannot be designed directly.

A community is a group of members who share a sense of belonging and engage in cooperative relationships. Community design is about fostering collaborative relationships in social activities for people to address common challenges. Professional designers only play a role in creating triggers, such as systems that support social activities or initiate events. They may also design meeting spaces and printed materials. This preliminary work already involves citizen participation. Community design aims at three outcomes: first, to make social activities inherently attractive to encourage cooperative relationships; second, to turn social problems into non-issues and maintain a good community; and third, to ensure that everyone leads a fulfilling life.

The three typologies described above represent stages in the evolution of social design, but it's important to note that each stage does not necessarily replace the previous one. Both the goal of improving working conditions and the goal of responding to people's real needs are still relevant today. Rather than a linear progression, this three-stage model emphasizes the accumulation of tasks and experiences over time (Fig.1). Moreover, the roots of each stage can be traced back to the previous one. In fact, the third stage, in which a designer's primary role is to build relationships between people, can also be observed in the earlier stages. This suggests that the creation of communities was not initially seen as a task for designers. Nevertheless, the three-stage model described here effectively captures the evolving mindset of designers in each historical period.

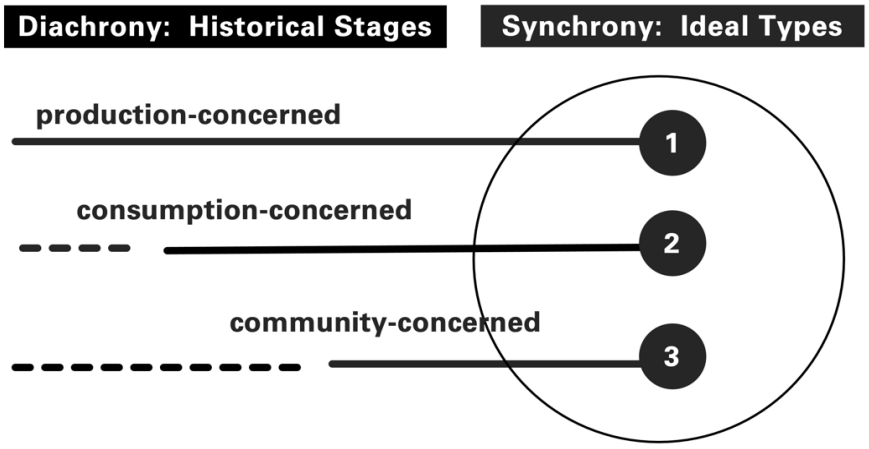

Figure 1: Accumulation Model

Parallel Histories: Divergence and Convergence

Next, after reviewing what social work is and how it has evolved, we will examine how social design intersects with social work today. At its core, social work is a professional endeavor dedicated to advancing social welfare by addressing diverse social problems. The definition articulated by the International Federation of Social Workers in 2014 captures the meaning of social work more broadly than is commonly thought. According to this definition, social work goes beyond individual casework with households in need; it encompasses all social innovation efforts aimed at improving human well-being.

> Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels. (7)

The origins of social work can be traced back to 19th-century Britain, following the Industrial Revolution (8). During this period, charity networks started to emerge in response to the increasing issue of poverty. From the outset, two distinct approaches became apparent. The first approach was represented by the Charity Organization Society, which was established in 1869. This organization conducted surveys in each district to identify those in need of assistance, aiming to empower them to achieve self-reliance. The second approach was exemplified by the Settlement Movement, which began in the 1880s. This was a group of university students who ventured into impoverished areas to address the social conditions contributing to poverty.

In the first half of the 20th century, social work with a focus on individuals in need of assistance was established as casework carried out by trained professionals (9). In the second half of the 20th century, however, criticism emerged that casework for individuals or families did not always address the underlying causes of social problems. This criticism led to the rise of 'radical' social work (10), which aimed to reform social systems, and community social work (11), which aimed to promote mutual support within communities. Today, social work in developed countries still emphasizes casework with individuals and families. However, it has also gained valuable experience in the field of community social work, reflecting a more comprehensive approach to tackling social challenges (12).

The origins of social design share common roots with the origins of social work, both stemming from 19th-century charity efforts (Fig.2). One of the influential figures during this period in 19th century Britain was John Ruskin, an art critic and social activist. Ruskin played a pivotal role in inspiring artist-designers like William Morris and guided activists toward social welfare initiatives. In contrast, during the 20th century, both design work, including social design, and social work were increasingly acknowledged as distinct professions.

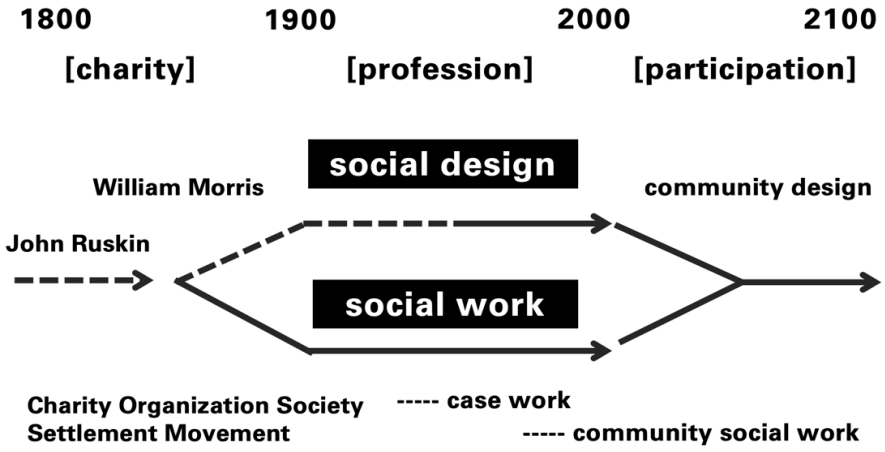

Figure 2: Parallel Histories

The situation has changed in the 21st century. Community design, as a form of social design, is not limited to the creation of products, but also involves thinking about social systems, organizing workshops, and fostering relationships between people, and requires design thinking from local people, social workers and others involved in the process. This dynamic makes community design, as a form of social design, closely like community social work. Yamazaki, a prominent proponent of community design, also recognizes the striking similarities between the two (13). In Japan, a remarkable structure has emerged in which designers commissioned by the government are actively engaged in community design as part of social welfare services.

Complementary Relation

Social design and social work share a common goal of enhancing people's quality of life by addressing social issues. As previously mentioned, they intersect in their community-focused efforts. However, despite these similarities, both fields can remain somewhat disconnected. It's important to note that social design only gained widespread awareness in the second half of the 20th century, whereas social work had already gained substantial recognition in the first half of the 20th century. Consequently, social work has accumulated a wealth of practical experience and a more extensive body of theoretical research. Hence, our initial question is what social design can learn from the knowledge of social work.

Social design has much to learn from social work. Among many issues, the most important is the theory of intervention as a guide to practice (14). The importance of this lies in the fact that designers, like social workers, often find themselves in the role of outsider when dealing with individuals facing challenges (15). In social work theory, intervention represents the stage of engagement with the person in question. It has been discussed in terms of 'anti-oppressive' practice (16), emphasizing sensitivity to the situation. Alongside the discussion of intervention, it's also important to refer to the discourse of care (17), which goes beyond nursing to encompass a broader notion of consideration. These theoretical foundations can significantly enhance the approach to working with people.

The next question is: what can social design contribute to social work? One of the main functions of design is to plan the creation of new things or the initiation of new projects. Social work, as defined by the International Federation of Social Workers in 2014, may encompass activities aimed at social innovation. However, at least in Japan, the qualification system for social workers typically emphasizes the ability to effectively manage existing welfare administration, with less emphasis on a mindset for systemic reform (18). In this context, social design, as an inherently planning field, can play an important role in identifying problems within the current social welfare system and proposing improvements.

Social design as a design discipline extends its influence into the aesthetic realm by incorporating elements with aesthetic qualities beyond mere beauty (19). These include attributes such as comfort, vibrancy, and relaxation. Social design makes a unique contribution by incorporating specific appeals into planned initiatives, especially when addressing social issues such as care. It strives to ensure that the spaces used, the printed materials distributed, and other items involved in these initiatives are not only aesthetically pleasing but also imbued with profound meaning.

Community Design is Still Design

The third stage of social design, community design, aims to encourage social activities with the cooperative relationship between people to independently address social problems they encounter.

In this approach, designers focus on designing the starting points. They design systems for citizen participation, events that facilitate interpersonal connections and, if necessary, meeting spaces and printed materials. This raises the question of how community design in Japan differs from previous community development and community social work, and why community design is still design.

The distinctive role of design in planning isn't limited to community design, as other forms of community work also involve planning. What distinguishes community design is its aesthetic focus, in particular its emphasis on making social activities aesthetically attractive to encourage active participation and foster cooperative relationships. Professional designers play a crucial role in the preparatory work, developing systems to facilitate participation, organizing launch events with broad generational appeal, and creating aesthetically pleasing environments conducive to cooperation.

A notable example is the 'Oi Oi Oi Exhibition' initiative organized by Studio L (20). In 2018 and 2019, Studio L, under the direction of Ryo Yamazaki, launched a 'Design School' program to address caregiver welfare issues. This initiative took place simultaneously in eight different regions across Japan. The Design School program was designed to encourage participants to work together to develop plans to improve caregiver welfare, an area that is often seen as challenging. Unlike traditional schools, this program didn't involve traditional teachers. Instead, it brought together people working in the care and welfare sector with those involved in community development and design. These diverse groups met seven times to collaborate on improvement plans, which were then presented at an exhibition in Tokyo for teams from different parts of Japan to share. The 'Oi Oi Oi Exhibition' showcased 67 projects in total, including a company where people in need of care work for young people, tour guides led by elderly people who sometimes go to the wrong places, and a circle where men who tend to be isolated can enjoy 'feminine' activities such as aromatherapy.

Conclusion

Social design has a strong similarity with social work in its common focus on addressing social problems. Both have their origins in 19th century charity work and eventually developed into distinct professions. In the 21st century, however, a specific type of social design, known in Japan as community design, which focuses on creating social systems, organizing events such as workshops, and fostering connections between people, intersects with the efforts of community social work.

In general, social design can gain valuable insights from the extensive experience of social work, especially in relation to intervention theories, as designers also find themselves in the role of outsiders intervening in the lives of clients. Conversely, social design can serve as a planning field that stimulates social innovation within contemporary social work practice. Considered as a form of design, social design can also make a significant contribution to the aesthetic field. It has the capacity to infuse aesthetic qualities not only into useful devices, but also into social activities themselves.

Notes

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Author Biography

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