

What is called 'Social Design'?

A Matter of Design

5th STS Italia Conference — Politecnico di Milano, June 12-14, 2014

Stéphane Vial
University of Nîmes, France.
@svial

An attempt to clarify the
conceptual foundations of what is
emerging as 'social design'.

1

Design can be said *social*
in various ways.

1.1

Design is *social* because design products have a social impact, i.e. impact on users and the everyday life.

1.2

Design is *social* because it is
a leverage for social innovation.
But what is 'social innovation'?

1.3.

Design is *social* in the sense that it refers to a specific field or discipline of design.

How to define it?

1.4.

Design is *social* when it implies the participation of users (like in '*social media*').

2

What is called 'Social Design' considered as a specific field?

2.1. Design to ‘help others’

‘Some call it design for the greater good. Others call it *social design*. Whatever you call it, it's clear that an altruistic impulse is on the rise in the design community’

— A. Shea, *Designing for Social Change* (2012).

2.2. Design ‘to support behavior change’

‘*Social Design* is the field of design that is concerned with the development of products and services to solve social problems, e.g., high unemployment rates, school dropouts, intercultural tensions, obesity, or climate change.’ — Eefje Ernst, Nynke Tromp (2013)

2.3. Design ‘in favour of society’

‘*Social Design*: How products and services can help us act in ways that benefit society’

— Nynke Tromp, PhD thesis, TU Delft (2013)

3

What if Design were *social* by definition?

3.1

‘An artist can *choose* whether to be responsible towards other human beings or not, but instead a designer *has* to be, by definition.’

— Paola Antonelli (2013)

3.2

To be responsible towards other human beings can be considered as the general purpose of design. This purpose can be define as a *social* purpose.

3.3

In this view, the ‘socialness’ of design is just part of its essence. Design is *social* by definition.

3.4

Furthermore, the 'socialness' can be a differentiation criterion between Art and Design. Art is social *by contingency* whereas Design is social *by necessity*.

4

What is called 'Social Design'?

Tip

It is easier to start to define what social design is **not** rather than what it is.

Proposition

'Social Design' can be considered as a contemporary attempt to separate/oppose a new kind of **human-centered** design from/to the traditional **market-centered** (industrial) design. Which is a return to the Design roots (William Morris).

Theoretical issue

Is 'social design' a new additional branch of design, separated from industrial design? or is it a *paradigm shift* in the concept of design that will lead soon to the death of industrial design?

How schools and programs of design are dealing with this issue?

Thanks!

Stéphane Vial
University of Nîmes, France.
@svial — fb.me/stephane.vial

These slides are here:

<http://goo.gl/x67Y4O>