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Principles at Work: Applying “Design Justice” in Professionalized Workplaces

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Principles at Work: Applying “Design Justice” in Professionalized Workplaces

By Danny Spitzberg, Kevin Shaw, Marissa Wilkins, Colin Angevine, M Strickland, Janel Yamashiro, Rhonda Adams, and Leah Lockhart – as members of the Design Justice Network Principles at Work Working Group.

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Abstract

The principles of design justice emerged over several years from close study of and with organized, community-based responses. However, design that impacts people’s day-to-day economic reality is often practiced not in community organizations, but in corporate enterprises such as auto insurance companies. How might we apply design justice principles with integrity in corporate contexts where ‘the’ ‘community’ is more absent or abstract? We as a group of 12 designers and design researchers who met through the Design Justice Network decided to explore this question and build a community of practice. On September 13th, 2020, we facilitated a scenario-based workshop for other DJN members on how to apply design justice at work. 64 participants formed breakout groups in which they reflected on fictitious scenarios about struggling with power and equity and then proposed ideas, strategies, and tools for the job based on their work experience. We found a majority of responses at the macro level, such as stakeholders mapping and identifying gatekeepers. Only a minority of responses focused on individual interventions such as checklists, and almost all of these were proposed in the context of influencing peers. We are still exploring how we might reorient the current focus on “doing ethics” less in terms of who in a company “owns” the conversation (e.g., designated specialists or committees), and more in terms of how designers and design researchers working along the production line can build power and gain control over processes and decisions, collectively. Our work ahead includes packaging up our workshop for peers to facilitate with their own coworkers and networks, and to build our community of practice with more scenarios and responses that help advance design justice.

Background and Motivation

Can we find design work doing justice in a mid-size auto insurance company? Will we? In the US, late payments and defaults on auto insurance are the #1 indicator of economic distress. People depend on their cars as a last resort, a place to sleep, a shelter.

The concept of “design justice” emerged in 2015 when a group of designers, artists, technologists, and community organizers participating in the Allied Media Conference in Detroit collaboratively and iteratively generated a set of ten principles for design justice. 2020, Sasha Costanza-Chock published a

book by that title. In the years in between, the Design Justice Network (DJN) formed to advance “a framework for analysis of how design (of images, interfaces, objects, the built environment, sociotechnical systems) influences the distribution of benefits and burdens between various groups of people.” Over 1,100 people have signed on to the principles.

But from the book to the network, design justice has mainly been studied or applied in the context of community-based organizations. On April 1, 2020, Danny Spitzberg hosted an interactive book talk with Sasha Costanza-Chock to debut “Design Justice,” and several participants who do design in professionalized workplaces asked questions or made comments about their struggle applying the principles. While “Design Justice” draws lessons from many examples of successful resistance, participants noted that major decisions about people’s day-to-day economic reality are made not in community, but in corporate contexts – like with auto insurance. What’s more, the vast majority of available or popular resources on doing “good” in design, such as IDEO’s “Little Book of Design Research Ethics,” are difficult to use without close support from an experienced peer or mentor who may not be able to articulate the challenges or approaches necessary. And as danah boyd and colleagues suggest in their study “Owning Ethics,” even for the most committed and dedicated practitioners individual or group tasked with knowing what’s “right” – like the 10 principles of design justice – is likely to fail due to corporate logics and structures that isolate and inoculate them.

In response, we as a self-organized group of 12 designers and design researchers who met through the Design Justice Network and the April book talk decided to explore how we might apply design justice principles with integrity in professionalized workplaces. We share curiosity about how we might apply the principles of design justice – which involves overturning deeply embedded, oppressive systems – as individual actors within hierarchical, profit-motivated, and extractive corporate contexts.

Approach

Following the April 2020 book talk, our working group began forming a community of practice. To start, Danny Spitzberg conducted a survey of participants to learn how DJN members have worked through situations in their day to day work related to power, equity, and community, as well as how much control they had over design processes and decisions. The survey responses consisted of 22 stories of unique but familiar situations, strategies, and results. The first group activity was synthesizing these stories to find patterns and insights. We then decided to learn more with more peers by developing a participatory workshop. Over several months, we crafted 12 scenarios of workplace situations in which design justice principles might be challenging to apply, and developed a virtual workshop as a way to invite DJN members to co-create with us ideas for applying design justice in professionalized workplaces.

In mid-September 2020, we facilitated a 2-hour virtual workshop with 64 participants. After opening our workshop by sharing its origin and vision, the 12 breakout groups of 5 to 6 individuals were self-facilitated. We prompted workshop participants to share reflections on their randomly-assigned scenario, and then develop “tools” for a “toolbox.” We defined tools as anything that might help in the scenario.

Findings

During the workshop, the breakout groups guided their own discussions. Several of us in the facilitation team took notes while others participated in groups. We found that in reflection, participants shared stories of common challenges and “shared wounds,” and in ideation for the “toolkit,” they shared ideas, strategies, and tools they’ve previously or are currently using.

Following the workshop, our working group synthesized tools that participants developed. We identified three levels of tools: micro (individual), meso (project level), and macro (institutional/ socio-cultural):

- Collective organizing and action, the macro tools, framed and filled up the majority of reflection and ideation. Examples included power mapping, asset mapping, avoiding being transactional in relationships, and tracking gatekeeping. In breakout groups, participants discussed who has power and why.
- The meso tools related to teamwork on projects, and most of these related to finding and building connections between people. Examples included strategies for recruiting co-conspirators, such as clarifying values, leveraging buzzwords, and finding metrics that capture what isn’t being tracked.
- Only a minority of developed tools focused on individual interventions, the micro tools. Examples include checklists to guide personal reflection on values, intentions, and motivations for the work and methods of tracking accountability. A theme that emerged in breakout group conversations was the ego of designers, the privilege they hold, and when it should be held and let go.

Discussion

We began to articulate levels for “tools” from our workshop, but productive discussion must go deeper. How might we reorient the current focus on “doing ethics” less in terms of who in a company “owns” the conversation (e.g., designated specialists or committees), and more in terms of how designers and design researchers working along the production line? How do these tools work in conjunction, and what is ‘just enough’ to build power and gain control over processes and decisions for design justice? Finally, we wonder how efforts to build a community of practice in DJN might help and/or hinder efforts among coworkers in a given workplace to organize.

Recommendations

Designers in professionalized workplaces tend to work on products and experiences, rather than on systems. However, practicing design justice in corporate contexts means expanding our conceptualization of design beyond isolated interactions delivering a specific output in specific contexts. So, while mainstream conceptualizations of design focus on rendering intent or solving problems within constraints like time and budget, we recommend focusing design justice on constraints at all levels, including company leadership that controls design processes and owns the outcomes.

Additionally, we recommend humility in design – overall, and especially in appreciating that not everything can be “designed.” The limits of design can be described simply as “policy.” To that end, we plan to expand the design justice toolkit into policy recommendations and other systems-level interventions. And in the interim, our future work includes packaging our workshop for peers to facilitate with their own coworkers and networks, and to build our community of practice to help advance design justice with a broader variety of workers and designers.

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