



## Designing Dissent: An adversarial design approach to politics

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A conversation held at DRS2016

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This document is conversation proposal and documentation in one.

### Catalysts

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### Introduction

Can an adversarial design approach help to foster public political actions in the refugee crises? How can policy makers by means of adversarial design be supported in mapping out the conflicting visions of all stakeholders involved and how is this helpful in the decision making process?

During this conversation we will explore the role of design mapping out conflicting ideas and opinions around the refugee crisis. Following the agonistic philosophy of Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe we will encourage contestation and dare our participants to relate to one another as adversaries, explore what they disagree on, instead of looking for their common interest.

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<sup>1</sup> Image source: <http://www.spacesofmigration.org/migration/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Screen-Shot-2016-02-24-at-12.22.31-PM.png>



According to DiSalvo (2010), adversarial design can give literary form to problematic situations which makes them less vague or confusing. He sees it as a form of inquiry; as a process of skilled examination and reconstruction that renders problematic situations sensible (p. 116) and even thinks that through this practice, adversarial design could become a new way of fostering public political action (p.123).

During the conversation we will explore how adversarial design can be meaningful in the current complex debates around the refugees.

## Context

Due to shifting responsibilities in policy making and the thriving “do-democracy” many governments struggle with how to engage and involve often conflicting ideas and activities of pro-active citizens, entrepreneurs, lobbyist and knowledge institutes. The tools and practices of policymakers have not kept sufficiently abreast of the current societal development (Bason, 2014).

More and more the collaborative practice of design is being looked upon by governments in order to deal with multi-stakeholder policies. In Design for Policy, Bason explores how design can be helpful in finding new means to engage various stakeholders in the policy making process. Design provides highly concrete research tools that can help to define and better understand the root causes of problems (Mulgan 2014). Besides, designers offer various means to stimulate a wide variety of views and are able to synthesize and express these in tangible ways. In short design strategies and techniques might be very helpful to deal with the decision making process in a multiple-helix society.

However, according to philosopher Chantal Mouffe, we are striving for pluralism that we know can never be achieved (*The paradox of Democracy* (Mouffe 2000, p.15-16). Consensus is always impossible, because exclusion serves as the very possibility of consensus. Mouffe argues for an agonistic approach to democracy and encourages contestation. Citizens ought to relate to one another as adversaries, explore what they disagree on, instead of looking for their common interest.

Also De Angelis (2007) stresses that we might be looking too much at the commons today thought as the basis on which to build social justice, environmental sustainability and a good life for all. But in a world driven by capital’s priorities there are also sites of struggle that we shouldn’t overlook. How can design play a role in this? Whilst there has been a substantial amount of literature written about political agonism as a theory, there are surprisingly little attempts to apply these theoretical assumptions to empirical case studies (Harvey, 2012).

The role of design in making space for contestation has been deeply explored by Carl DiSalvo (2012) who introduced adversarial design as a way to talk about design doing the work of agonism through the conceptualization and making of products and services and our experiences with them. DiSalvo distinguished design for politics where design is applied to politics and supports and improves the mechanism and procedures of governances, from

political design that is implicitly contestation and strives to investigate an issue and raise questions concerning that issue. Where design for politics is a field that is now widely being explored (Bason, 2014), political design might be a direction that we need to push forward more especially when facing complex issues such as the current refugee crisis in Europe.

### **The refugee crisis**

In 2015, over 1 million people – refugees, displaced persons and other migrants – made their way to the European Union, either escaping conflict in their country or in search for better economic prospects. The numbers have shown a decreasing trend in 2016: by June 2016 around 156 000 people reached Europe (source: UNHCR: [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/refugee-crisis\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/refugee-crisis_en)).

Many refugees arrive in the EU after perilous land or sea journeys and require basic humanitarian assistance. For most European countries it is a massive struggle to give shelter to this amount of newcomers, let alone offering them a humane perspective for the future, since going back to their home countries is not an option for the short term.

Our overarching research question for this conversation is: can an adversarial design approach help to foster public political actions in the refugee crises? How can adversarial design help to give form to the problematic situation that refugees are facing, especially looking into the complex (and lengthy) decision making process? How can policy makers by means of adversarial design be supported in mapping out the conflicting visions of all stakeholders involved and how is this helpful in the decision making process?

What can designers do in these complex, political situations? Can they play a role in such crises situations and how could we define that role? During DRS2016 in Brighton we initiated a conversation (one of the official formats during the conference, similar to a workshop but focused on exchanging ideas rather than learning tools or techniques) around this topic, exploring and questioning the role of design in politics.

### **The session at DRS2016**

We started our conversation session by showcasing some outcomes of the The What Design Can Do Refugee Challenge: a global design competition in search of game-changing ideas for accommodating, connecting, integrating and helping refugees in all kinds of ways. The challenge was initiated by the What Design Can Do conference and supported by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the IKEA Foundation, and focused on refugees in urban areas from the moment they asked for asylum onwards, as nearly 60 % of the world's 20 million refugees live in urban areas.

Over 600 designers handed in their ideas. The design proposals varied from self supporting modular housing systems to online platforms and governmental structures. Also many ideas for matchmaking or connecting skills and talents of refugees to organisations or people were submitted.

All these wonderful proposals are very solution driven. An approach that fits very much with the design discipline. Designers are trained to create solutions, rather than 'just' understand problems better; be part of the solution and not the problem itself. Hardly any of the hand in ideas focused on the dilemmas society is facing nor how to support policy makers in their decision making process.

We think there is a need for designers to exert their influence beyond creating solutions, and have more impact on the political arena. Following the agonistic thinking of philosopher Mouffe, we think that opposition is not well represented in current politics and conflicting ideas are acted out beyond the political arena. As for Mouffe (2013), Artistic activism, or Artivism as she calls it, can help us to acknowledge that some ideas are conflicting, that not all dilemmas are solvable. This acknowledgement can help designers to build new forms of expression of these dilemmas that not only include rational thinking but also the emotions at play.

DiSalvo (2010) introduces in the term adversarial design as defining a means for design to open up controversial and contested issues in society. Adversarial designs do not apply design to politics in an attempt to improve the political process, but they are "implicitly contestations and strive to question conventional approaches to political issues".[1]

How could an adversarial design approach help politicians to deal with the refugee crisis? That was the overarching question for our conversation session.

### **Conversation**

We asked the participants in our conversation session to zoom in on the refugee crisis.

It is interesting to note here that at the start of the conference we were confronted with a for many at the conference unexpected Brexit, the result of the British referendum on continuation of the British membership of the EU, on 23 June 2016.

"Politicians neglected the refugee crisis whilst campaigning" wrote the New Statesman (29 June 2016, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/06/what-are-consequences-brexit-refugee-crisis>). "Many of the main issues aired in the course of the referendum debate were related to the refugee crisis, regardless of how little it impacted on them in reality; immigration, strain on public services, national identity. The refugee crisis became a "proxy issue"; implied, but not addressed, for fear of detrimental impact in the polls." (In the Brighton & Hove area, 68.6% of voters cast a vote for Remain (in the EU), while 31.4% sided with Leave. In the context of the refugee crisis and Brexit, we asked our 20 participants, divided in 4 groups of 5 people, to deal with the (for the purpose of our session invented) fact that Brighton is facing the arrival of 3000 new asylum seekers. The city council decided that they will be temporary hosted in the city centre's sports hall. How should politicians further deal with this situation?

We asked the groups to first define a persona in Brighton: e.g. a neighbour, a local politician, a scientist or an entrepreneur. Next, the participants were asked to define the

pains & gains of this persona in relation to the asylum seekers, including the deeper emotions at stake.

The groups easily defined a character and could sum up many arguments in favour of, or against the arrival of asylum seekers. One group for instance, described how the influx of 3000 newcomers would effect the normal activities taking place at the sports hall. If politicians don't consider what new services and facilities should be offered to citizens to replace their sports hall activities, this could easily create conflict.

After using the personas to discuss various emotions of people in Brighton together, the separate groups were asked to develop a design approach that could help to express their persona's voice – especially their deeper emotions – in the Brighton political arena.

We asked the conversation participants to question these issues by means of a 'deep democracy (Kramer, 2014)' exercise. Key in deep democracy is to first gather all insights and make sure that the views of the minorities are taken into account when taking majority based decisions. In order to do so it is necessary to intentionally search for 'deviant' opinions and take these into account in order to make inclusive decisions. These are the steps the groups followed:

- first all shared insights about our Brighton refugee scenario were collected;
- then we searched collectively for 'the alternatives'. When we are creating insights, often a common understandings pop up. In this exercise we intentionally searched for deviant understandings;
- next, representatives of each group were asked to spread their deviant understandings to another group and negotiate and lobby with them to get buy in, before voting on their alternative.
- If we did not have a unanimous vote for the idea something had to be blocking the political process and the group needed to find out through discussion what caused the dissent.

## **Reflection**

In the plenary wrap up we reflected on the approach we took in the conversation and questioned whether this could help to express opposing opinions or unheard voices in the political arena.

The participants strongly believed that a 'redesign' of the current political arena is needed. Many felt that at this moment in time, we face a huge gap between the 'rational debate' that is taking place in politics and the emotional discussions on the street and online. If we don't bridge this gap it easily leads to frustrations, mistrust and disbelief, also proven by the fact that the polls no longer properly predict the outcome of elections.

A next step would be to make an adversarial design based on these conversations. This would entail capturing the discussions in tangible conversation pieces that could serve as a canvas to stick ideas on and use for further discussion. The first author will build on to this conversation during DRS2016, and warmly invites others to engage with her ongoing research into possible roles for design in the political arena.

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