

# What Do Designers Have to Offer When Facing Societal Challenges?

**Keywords:** design for social innovation; design objects; designers role; societal challenges

## 1. Catalyst Information

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## 2. Conversation Description

Objects, artifacts, things. All these words are part of design, sometimes as synonyms, sometimes with different meanings. Since the establishment of design schools, designers have been trained to create new or improve existing products; we are good at designing these objects, artifacts and things. However, when we as designers involve ourselves in societal challenges, when we engage in designing for social innovation, how can we use our expertise of designing objects? In recent years, (participatory) design scholars have argued that the design community's fundamental challenge is to move from designing objects to designing Things (Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren, 2012) and that participatory design is particularly suited to renounce the designer's obsession with objects in favor of Things (Binder et al, 2015). These Things are defined as 'socio-material assemblies', characterized by Latour (1999) as collectives of humans and non-humans.

The shift away from designing objects to designing Things transforms design from being outcome-oriented to being process-oriented instead. However, what remains of our



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expertise on designing objects? Shifting to the process-oriented Thinging approach, design objects become non-human actors, but what is the role and purpose of the objects we design:

- What value do designers and their design objects (according to the DRS community) have to offer in addressing societal challenges?

We will investigate this main research question in this conversation through interactive case study reviews, introduced by the catalysts, and bold propositions. Participants will be asked to take position on these propositions in order to address some key characteristics around designing for social innovation, such as: (1) the role of the designer in addressing societal challenges; (2) the design objects we create and their value; and (3) what happens when we leave.

### **3. Organizing research question**

The main research question we will address is:

- What value do designers and their design objects (according to the DRS community) have to offer in addressing societal challenges?

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These characteristics are captured in sub-questions:

- What is the wanted level of attendance and commitment of designers? Should we be observing, supporting, facilitating, provoking, ...?
- What do we still consider a design object – can for example a workshop be a design object? What is the value of these design objects in designing for social innovation?
- What happens when we leave the social innovation arena? What is the risk of the situation reverting or worse? How could we prevent this?
- How can design research (according to the DRS community) support designers in defining and fulfilling their role in facing societal challenges?

### **4. Set-up of your session**

The session will start with a general introduction to designing for social innovation; a short presentation given by one of the catalyst. Next, four catalysts will shortly discuss a specific case which they were involved in and present one or two statements related to the main research question or sub-questions around this specific case. For each statement, between

two and four answers will be given. We will actively involve the participants in addressing these statements. To achieve this, there will be four coloured areas in the room. The participants will be asked to literally take a position on the statement by moving to the colour they agree with (or most agree with). Subsequently, we will invite participants to elaborate on their choice and engage in conversation on this topic.

Four catalysts will take this role of presenting case studies and statements:

- Mascha van der Voort will introduce a case around the gas extraction in the Dutch province of Groningen. This gas extraction is very beneficial for the entire Dutch economy, but has also caused earthquakes to appear in the region; an effect felt and feared by the Groningen citizens. Designers took on a mediating role to try to bridge a gap between the Groningen citizens and both the national government and a gas extraction company as a result of feelings of distrust and injustice and connect citizens to powerful strangers.
- Thomas Binder will introduce a case of collaborative design between senior citizens and the municipality of Copenhagen on how the municipality may support seniors in forming informal networks for peer support. Designers staged 'design laboratories' that 'bracketed off' conventional categories of 'elderly care' and 'health promotion' and instead invoked open rehearsals of authorized citizenship in partnership with municipal officers around playful work-out in public parks.
- Jacob Buur will introduce a case regarding codesign for social innovation within Denmark that illustrates the role of objects and things in relation to the role of designers in the quest for social innovation.
- Per Linde will introduce a lengthy process of co-design with youths, having the aim of addressing empowering aspects of social inclusion and promoting the youths as active citizens in relation to urban local societal challenges. How role of design can act as a way of building up a networked discourse around the issue of "Being heard and seen" in the city will be discussed. Especially, there will be a focus of sustaining relationships also beyond specific projects and making diverse sets of actors come together and form new alliances.

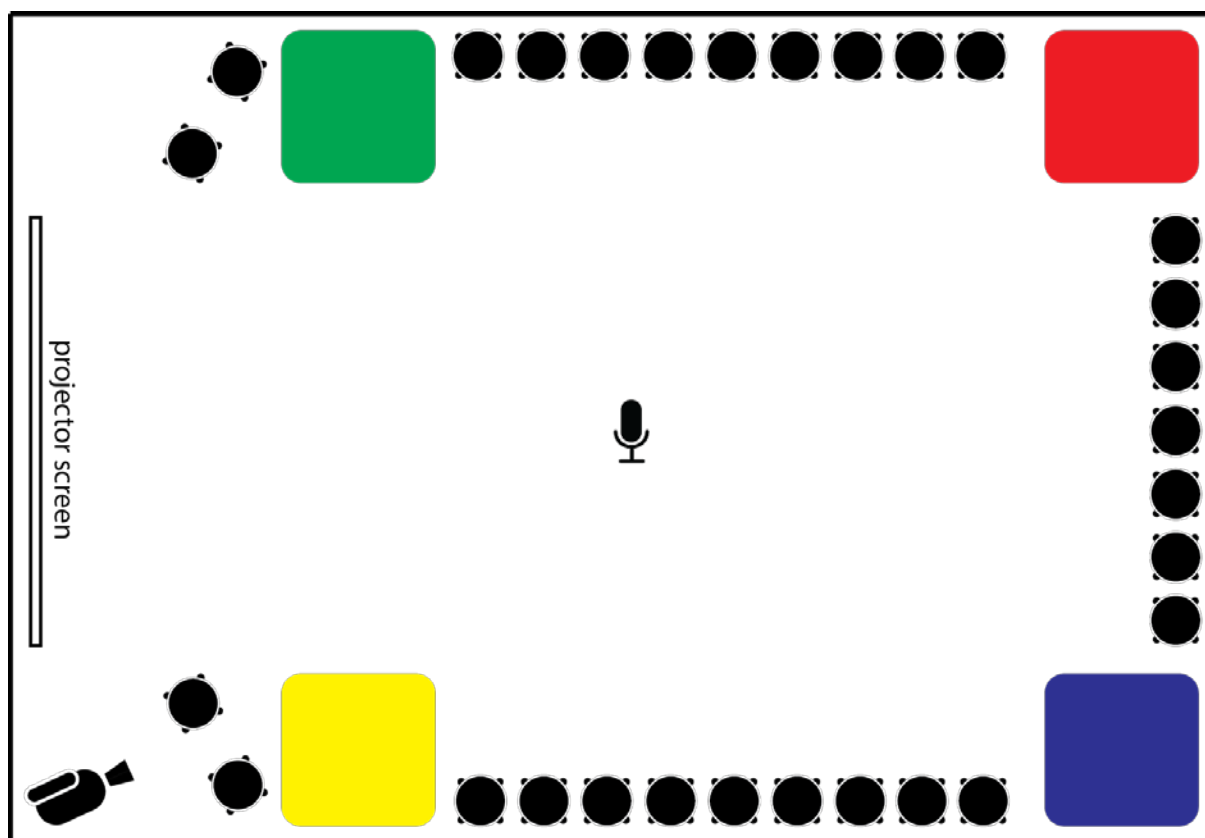
Following the four case study discussions, we will further discuss the research questions. The catalysts will initiate a short introductory discussion on related statements and additional statements can be introduced by participants. For each statement we will ask all participants to take position and invite participants to explain their choice. The catalysts and/or participants will then respond and engage in a lively debate.

As for documentation, we will use a video camera to capture the conversation session, allowing us to analyse the spread of the participants over the four coloured areas. Additionally, we will use microphones to record everything said by both the catalysts and the participants. This way, we can support the analysis of the participant's position data with quotes in the disseminating report on the conversation session.

In addition the four catalysts presenting the case studies and engaging in the debates, the fifth catalyst, Robert-Jan den Haan, will support the conversation practically by assisting logistics during the conversation, asking participants to explain their choice and pose follow-up questions to participants.

### 5. Type of space and equipment required

For this conversation, we require a room large enough to move around as we will ask the participants to take positions on the statements. To allow participants to freely move around, tables and other large objects should be removed from the room. Ideally, seats which do not take up much space – such as bar stools – are placed on the side of the room. The catalysts will also sit on bar stools in the front of the room, next to a projector screen. A simple overview of this setting is provided in the figure below (note: we intend to create the coloured areas using posters on the wall).



As for equipment, we require the following items for presenting, executing and documenting the conversation session:

Table 1 Required equipment for the conversation.

Equipment	Amount	Specification/Extra
Beamer & projector screen	1	
White board or poster wall	1	

Coloured A0 posters	4	Red, Blue, Yellow, Green
Video camera	2	In order to capture the participants' positioning on the statements
Microphone & speakers	2	Handheld and moveable, 1 for the catalysts, 1 for the participants
Microphone	1	Central microphone connected to the video camera to record the entire session

## 6. Dissemination strategy

We will produce a concluding document in the form of a short paper where we will focus on reporting the conversations as well as the results of position taking of the participants, combined with quotes of the discussions. The short paper will end with some recommendations on what the DRS community considers the future role of designers in addressing societal challenges and how design research could support this. The catalysts are committed to write this short paper.

## 7. References

- Binder, T., Brandt, E., Ehn, P., & Halse, J. (2015). Democratic design experiments: between parliament and laboratory. *CoDesign*, 11(3-4), 152-165.
- Björgvinsson, E., Ehn, P., & Hillgren, P. A. (2012). Design Things and design thinking: Contemporary participatory design challenges. *Design Issues*, 28(3), 101-116.
- Latour, B. (1999). *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press.

### About the Catalysts:

**Mascha van der Voort** is professor in Human-Centred Design and co-director of DesignLab at the University of Twente. Her credo is that meaningful solutions to the challenges we face as society can only be designed through a cross-disciplinary approach and co-creation.

**Thomas Binder** is professor in Codesign at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Schools of Design. He is part of the co-design research center, CODE engaging open design collaborations and participatory design in the context of design anthropology, interaction design and social innovation.

**Jacob Buur** is professor of User-Centred Design at the University of Southern Denmark and research director of the SDU Design Research Environment. Jacob develops methods for studying and involving users in design, in particular video techniques for bridging user studies and innovation.

**Per Linde** is an Interaction designer and Associate Professor at Malmö University. His current research relates to how the Internet of Things can address societal challenges.

**Robert-Jan den Haan** is a PhD researcher in Human-Centred Design at the University of Twente. His research focuses on supporting collaboration in multi-actor settings with strong socio-technical complexity.