The World Doesn’t Need Changing: We Do

A conversation between Cheryl Heller & Paulina Cornejo

This discussion focuses on how language-related issues are the underlying principle of all design, and on the importance of communication and building trust. It also gives a detailed view of social design and the evolution of its theory and practice; its defining skills and characteristics; its latest real-world applications; and the steps required to measure design’s social impact.

Cheryl Heller is the director of Design Integration at Arizona State University and founding chair of the first MFA program in Social Design at SVA. Paulina Cornejo is the head of CENTRO’s Social Design Hub.
Throughout your career you have developed very successful and diverse paths as a designer, entrepreneur, and corporate leader. A little over a decade ago, you began to get involved in the fields of social design and innovation. What inspired you to take this path?

One of my most important influences is Paul Polak, whom I met at the Aspen Design Summit. Paul is a former psychiatric researcher who began working to eliminate poverty many decades ago. He was in Aspen because David Kelley, founder of IDEO, told him that what he was doing was design. So Paul showed up there because he wanted to see if David Kelley was right; if he was, then Paul had an agenda to change design. When I met Paul, he was wearing a plaid flannel shirt and suspenders in a sea of designers all dressed in black with silver accessories. Before we left, I stuck a note in his suspenders that said “I’m not sure I understand what you are doing, but I want to help you do it.” We became very close, and he more than anyone else has had an influence on me. Paul created the expression “Design for the Other 90%”; he has brought 20 million people out of poverty; he was the first to discover what he called a “social architecture”—an invisible social environment that, for example, determines certain people’s ability to cope with mental illness. He saw that the difference between people with mental illness who end up in the hospital and those who don’t often relies in other social factors, like poverty and homelessness. This whole idea of social architecture is the basis for social design.

How do you approach social design?

First, it’s important to define what we mean. Social design is the design of relationships; the creation of new social conditions intended to increase agency, creativity, equity, social justice, resilience, and connection to nature. That means that it’s not the traditional material and visual design that we know. It involves the application of the design process at a larger scale, in order to transform corporate or social cultures, and create the conditions for more creative and just societies. It’s a new field, and one I think about a lot. I am in the middle of a PhD program, for which I am situating social design in the context of other fields, and investigating what difference it makes, what makes it good, and how its effect can be measured. The language we use to describe it is very complicated because humans seem to have to name a new process or put their mark on it. A part of what I am hoping to do is bring some clarity to that in our work. I end up using the expression social design because I think it is the most literal.
I agree, it is a complex topic. In 2014, in the process of creating the Social Design Hub at CENTRO, I analyzed more than thirty concepts related to social design or social innovation. My conclusion was that even though all of them had similar focuses and descriptions, their conceptual complexity amounted to disconnected practices that seemed to limit learning and knowledge exchange. What is your perspective on this from a practical point of view?

Yes. We are looking to redesign broken societies; there are artifacts, products, technologies created in the process but to me what makes this design a discrete practice is the fact that we start by looking at the invisible dynamics in human relationships as material we can work with. Maybe some think that’s the work of people in development or social workers, but it is everyone’s work, and we will come to see that all of these silos separating design and research are arbitrary boundaries. We will learn from each other’s experiences and put it together instead of working in our own silos. About five years into the School of Visual Arts (SVA) program, I decided that we had to make the case for the effectiveness of social design, and no one had quantified that yet. There had been no common way to measure design’s impact. In 2017 we had a symposium called Design + Health, bringing together about 250 designers, corporate leaders, health practitioners and funders. Now, we are deeply involved in a longer research project to understand how people around the world are measuring design’s effectiveness. In this process, and in the process of writing my book (The Intergalactic Design Guide), I have seen many examples of effective design that are done by people who do not think of themselves as designers. There are some policemen in Springfield, Massachusetts, who are using what they have learned—e.g. counterterrorism methods—to strengthen these communities and reduce gang and drug violence. The process they use is what we would call social design. Instead of arresting people for committing crimes, they are working with communities to find solutions. But they don’t think of themselves as designers, they are police officers. The more deeply we get into this, the more resonance the question has.

You mentioned the invisible dynamics in human relationships. In other interviews, you have talked about designing language and conversations as a way to change behavior. Nonetheless, how can we design trust?

It’s elusive, right? There is a wonderful book called True Enough, (Farhad Manjoo) which came out a while ago. The last chapter is remarkable because it describes a town in Southern Italy that failed
because people were so mistrustful of each other. They wouldn’t even tell someone if they weren’t feeling well because they wouldn’t show that vulnerability. It’s quite remarkable to look at the cost of the lack of trust. I love language more than anything and I think it is the beginning of all design. If you read Leadership and the New Science by Margaret Wheatley, she talks about the fact that all change begins with a conversation between people. When we use language filled with clichés, or politicized, or just the empty generalities that most of us speak with, there is no traction. No one can disagree with you but the language is too unclear to inspire action. To me there is only relative truth, but speaking from the truth of what you really see and believe has to be the first step and I think is so often overlooked. We think we are communicating, we think we are giving someone a picture of what we are seeing, or we think we understand them and we actually don’t.

How did you decide education was an important matter and get involved in it?

Richard Wild, the chair of Undergraduate Design and Advertising Programs SVA) and I became good friends while on a boring nonprofit board together. He asked me to teach, and I said, “that’s not going to happen because I travel all the time; I’m running a company; I don’t like kids that much anyway, and I hear the pay is terrible.” He said, “just try one class; I’ll send the students to your studio, you don’t even have to come to school.” He asked me to think about something that bothered me and that I would like to fix. I was never educated as a designer, I was educated in art and then I went back to school for writing; however, what I saw in students that I hired and knew was that they had been taught self-expression and given tools, but they had never had a conversation about how design connects to the world and the impact that it has had, nor had they considered the difference between what they did and what happened as a result of it. So, the undergrad class was an exploration of that and then, after about five years, SVA said “what would that look like as a graduate program?” And that became MFA Design for Social Innovation at SVA.

When you began teaching the Design for Good undergraduate course, what was it about?

At the time I started we didn’t label it social design; we didn’t have a separate language for it. It wasn’t a field, it was just this sense of—you know—that Buckie Fuller quote: “If the future of the world depends

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on who I am and what I do, how should I be, and what should I do?” These are human instincts. When I think about education now, honestly I think about what you are referring to regarding CENTRO’s program involving its local community and I think that what I am doing here should not be a separate program. It should instead be embedded in everything, but, for this reason, this will not happen in the near future; nonetheless, I would like for this separation between social design and every other profession to go away. It should not be necessary to teach empathy. If we have to teach it, we have failed. Now that I have done it for nine years, I just see this needs to belong everywhere and these skills need to be accessible to everyone.

**How do you imagine these skills being accessible to everyone?**

I went to visit a school in Philadelphia, a training program that accepts people who have been in prison and guarantees them jobs in a grocery store. At first, I thought I could hide and just observe in the back of the room, but someone made me come to the front to speak to the class. They asked me what I do, and I had to explain what social design was. It is usually hard for people to understand, but, in this case, I was stunned because they immediately understood the need for social design, since they know that society is broken. They experience it every day. Thanks to this experience, I thought these were the people who need and deserve to know how to create their own futures. I look at what the DSI program accomplishes: we give people agency, we give them all the skills they need to identify an issue, to understand it, to reframe it, to facilitate others in helping to change it. Everyone should have that ability, everybody should have that sense of agency and possibility. I don’t know how, maybe that’s something we can talk about doing together.

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I agree. It’s more about transversal skills that shouldn’t be viewed as something separated. For over two years we conducted a research to identify seventy-seven socially oriented projects at CENTRO that were developed by students between 2007 and 2016. We found out that participants had developed seven key social and professional abilities, in alignment with the so-called skills for the future and with the SDG 2030: critical thinking, narrative connection, business development, social intelligence, procedural reasoning, collaboration, systemic vision. What is your view on the inclusion of these abilities in the curriculum?
It’s true. I love what you are saying. Writing a book gave me the discipline to be able to understand and codify what I think by seeing it in a different form. I have come to think of this as kind of a disruption of the world of experts, by giving everyone who participates the necessary skills to collaborate and create a new future. The skills needed are the soft skills that are now called power skills. These are the ones you mentioned: communication, critical thinking, collaboration, facilitation, leadership. And the creative process, of course, because it is accessible to everyone. Our curriculum is based on a combination of the expert skills and soft skills, and it sounds as if yours is the same. The big design consultancies struggle to maintain a kind of secrecy or magic around what they do that no one else can. It is becoming more difficult for them. When your job is to lead a collaborative design process, you have to teach the people that you are leading, they learn how to do it. This can become a sore point for traditional designers, who want to show up as if they are the only people with answers.

Yes, it’s very interesting. We are working to embed these approaches in the curriculum, but of course we have a long way to go. When we were doing the research, I mentioned I interviewed more than thirty-five students and graduates with social projects, and it was revealing to find out how the input of one professor, even just one comment during the undergrad studies, could be powerful enough to affect the election of socially related topics for theses, dissertations, and even professional pathways.

You mentioned the creation of the MFA in Social Innovation. After five years, how do you see the professional pathways for your graduates?

Yes, our graduates have an easy time finding a job. They are getting lots of interesting work proposals. Because we are in New York and all our faculty members are professionals, our networks are large and students can take advantage of them. Our alums tend to be the people at an innovation lab who are hired to develop new ideas and change the culture. One of our students was the first designer hired by the Peterson Health Institute; three other former students have just been hired at the Global Health Institute at Mount Sinai. One of them is now teaching design to doctors. Our graduates are the ones leading the change. Another of our students is the head of the Innovation Lab at UNICEF; another is in the new service design lab at New York City’s Office of Economic Development. Some other students are in

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jobs that on the outside might seem like traditional jobs—e.g. one of them is working in a huge interaction studio; however, they manage to integrate what they’ve learned here into other kinds of projects. As Doug Powell, who works at IBM, said: “It’s a very good time to be a designer.” Design is in demand now. Depending on the industry, graduates either enter it blatantly as coming to work on the human aspects of things or it fits into another job description, but that’s what they do. The point I always try to make—even if it may be a source of frustration for me—is that I think this discipline is needed everywhere; it’s needed inside of corporations with cultures that are unhealthy; it’s needed in government. Many people think this is just the non-profit world, and that’s something I want to change. It’s why we teach entrepreneurship, it’s why we make an effort to expose students to the corporate world. A lot of young people don’t like corporations, they think that’s the dark side. We work hard to convince them that you can’t generalize in that way anymore—any more than you can generalize about other things.

I completely agree with you about design being in strong demand now. In a way, the conversation has evolved very fast and this is good, but, at the same time, we are facing the risk of the social becoming some kind of trend, a commonplace that makes me think of greenwashing. For me, many solutions seem ephemeral and anecdotic. Everyone wants to become a change, maker but this requires commitment and certain understanding of contexts and relations, skills, time, education, as well as a good dose of uncertainty with regard to the outcomes. I don’t think many organizations are ready or committed to this. What do you think?

I think it’s a real dilemma and that’s why I felt a responsibility to demonstrate the rigor of the practice. When people feel like they can take a four-day workshop, then go out and muck around in other people’s lives, it makes me crazy. That’s what’s happening and it is a real danger. That’s why I launched the Measured Project, to quantify the contribution of design and bring rigor and standards to its practice. We are working to demonstrate and showcase examples of successful and responsible social design. We may never change the people who think that doing a poster for a cause is social change. I don’t know what to do about it, except to demonstrate the responsibility required and to keep doing what we are doing. Design thinking is another trend that is misleading and a bit out of control. It leads people to believe that if you have enough post-it notes you can “change the world.” The world doesn’t need changing: We do.
Since you started teaching fourteen years ago, how have the environment and mindsets changed? Where were we and where are we now?

We make a point of telling students that they didn’t invent this practice of social design; that people have been addressing human issues for as long as there have been societies. It’s important for all of us to learn what has been done, all the work that has come before, and what has been successful. What’s new is obviously the formal application of the design process to these things; in the time that I have been involved in it, I think the discourse has progressed dramatically. There is learning taking place and sharing that is taking place. We begin to have a much greater understanding of what this kind of design is and how it works. It’s a real profession now, you know? There are more and more places where you don’t have to explain it. When you talk to The Gates Foundation, you don’t need to explain why you are doing what you are doing, and that’s really exciting. There is an academic discourse, there is a practical discourse, and there is growing receptivity in lots of unexpected places where people have been trying to address things and are realizing that the old methods aren’t working.

Where do you think we are heading up to?

Well, first we have to get rid of Trump…. It’s a really interesting moment. I can’t separate where I think we are going from where I want to go. As I said, I think we have the chance to integrate what we have learned about how to be inclusive and how to use what we do to create healthier societies and a healthier culture. I think there is an opportunity to expand the knowledge base and make this accessible to more people. Several colleagues, some of our students and I are involved in a project to reduce the number of young people moving from foster care to homelessness. The conversations that I am having would not have taken place a couple of years ago; a patron would have never said “I want to use design to guide this process.” I see real progress at the corporate, philanthropic, government, and global level.
You just published your book *The Intergalactic Design Guide*. What can you share with us about it?

Do you know a book called *The Elements of Style*? It’s forty years old and has been kept in print and revised over decades. Maira Kalman worked on an illustrated version of it. It’s this very skinny book that has the principles of how to write; it’s so elegant and beautiful. It doesn’t give you rules, it gives you motivation and principles. It has always been an inspiration to me and has driven me to simplify things and to get to the bottom of things and to make them more accessible. I detest the complication and obfuscation of things, and so my hope for this book is that it explains in really plain language what the potential of social design is. In writing the book, I have tried to make the principles of social design—those that lead to equity and justice and environmental responsibility—which actually are the commonsense principles that they seem to be. The social design process ought to be the default way we work. It’s intuitive, right? Of course we should include the people we want to help. Of course we should experiment before we spend a lot of money planning, etc. These principles are not difficult, but we do need a new generation of leaders who will step up and say: “I’m willing to take this on. I will help guide this collaborative process.” I know that what you are doing and what I hope to do here—and expand it in any way we can—is to inspire people to step up. We know we can provide the skills to take on the challenge. That’s a big hope. And that’s why I wrote the book.