

Provotyping Futures Through Design

Authors : Elisabetta Cianfanelli, Maria Claudia Coppola, Margherita Tufarelli

Abstract : Design practices throughout history return a critical understanding of society since they always conveyed values and meanings aimed at (re)framing reality by acting in everyday life: here, design gains cultural and normative character, since its artifacts, services, and environments hold the power to intercept, influence and inspire thoughts, behaviors, and relationships. In this sense, design can be persuasive, engaging in the production of worlds and, as such, acting in the space between poietics and politics so that chasing preferable futures and their aesthetic strategies becomes a matter full of political responsibility. This resonates with contemporary landscapes of radical interdependencies challenging designers to focus on complex socio-technical systems and to better support values such as equality and justice for both humans and nonhumans. In fact, it is in times of crisis and structural uncertainty that designers turn into visionaries at the service of society, envisioning scenarios and dwelling in the territories of imagination to conceive new fictions and frictions to be added to the thickness of the real. Here, design's main tasks are to develop options, to increase the variety of choices, to cultivate its role as scout, jester, agent provocateur for the public, so that design for transformation emerges, making an explicit commitment to society, furthering structural change in a proactive and synergic manner. However, the exploration of possible futures is both a trap and a trampoline because, although it embodies a radical research tool, it raises various challenges when the design process goes further in the translation of such vision into an artefact - whether tangible or intangible -, through which it should deliver that bit of future into everyday experience. Today designers are making up new tools and practices to tackle current wicked challenges, combining their approaches with other disciplinary domains: futuring through design, thus, rises from research strands like speculative design, design fiction, and critical design, where the blending of design approaches and futures thinking brings an action-oriented and product-based approach to strategic insights. The contribution positions at the intersection of those approaches, aiming at discussing design's tools of inquiry through which it is possible to grasp the agency of imagined futures into present time. Since futures are not remote, they actively participate in creating path-dependent decisions, crystallized into designed artifacts par excellence, prototypes, and their conceptual other, provotypes: with both being unfinished and multifaceted, the first ones are effective in reiterating solutions to problems already framed, while the second ones prove to be useful when the goal is to explore and break boundaries, bringing closer preferable futures. By focusing on some provotypes throughout history which challenged markets and, above all, social and cultural structures, the contribution's final aim is understanding the knowledge produced by provotypes, understood as design spaces where designs's humanistic side might help developing a deeper sensibility about uncertainty and, most of all, the unfinished feature of societal artifacts, whose experimentation would leave marks and traces to build up f(r)ictions as vital sparks of plurality and collective life.

Keywords : speculative design, provotypes, design knowledge, political theory

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