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Re-engaging with Design History through the Practical Turn

Extended Abstract

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Introduction

This paper reflects on the interpretation of design histories for use in contemporary design practice. After the introduction and advocacy of STS approaches in design history by Fallan (Fallan, 2008, 2010), I started to become interested in using these approaches for understanding contemporary design challenges (Eggink, 2016). This interest resulted in the development of historically informed design methods (Eggink, 2011, 2017; Eggink & Snippert, 2017) in the context of the Practical Turn. This approach to design history is recently thoroughly investigated by Göransdotter (2020), who describes how multiple perspectives on the past can inform the deeper understanding of possible futures.

The Practical Turn

The Practical Turn is a term that is coined by Eggink and Dorrestijn (Eggink & Dorrestijn, 2018) for the collaboration between Philosophy of Technology and Design Research. Some results of this collaboration are Utopian Technology (Dorrestijn & Verbeek, 2013), the Product Impact Tool (Dorrestijn, 2012; Dorrestijn & Eggink, 2014; Belle, Dorrestijn & Eggink, 2018), and Open Script Design (Stam & Eggink, 2014; Stam, 2015). This paper specifically centers around the concept of Utopian Technology.

Utopian Technology

I will explain the use of Utopian Technology for designing responsibly, based on the experiences with a one-week Industrial Design Workshop at the University of Antwerp. Here, 18 students executed a conceptual design project for the improvement of public space. During the process they applied the idea of Utopian Technology in both the analysis of the problem and in the synthesis phase of their designs.

Utopian Technology is a design approach, based on the notion that in design history, several periods and accompanying movements are discernable that envisioned to radically change society through design. To the trained historian this is not new, however in this context it is valuable for showing how knowledge of design history can make better designers for the future. In the approach we restrict ourselves to four distinct and well-known design movements; Arts & Crafts, Modernism, Late modernism, and Postmodernism (figure 1). The designs, ideas, values, approaches and underlying world views of these movements are then used as possible guiding principles in the design process.



Figure 1: illustration of the four Utopian Design movements in Architecture

The four mentioned periods then respectively lead to a ‘restorative’, a ‘socially-functionalistic’, a ‘technology-at-a-human-scale’, and a ‘diversity-of-lifestyles’ utopian vision on design (Dorrestijn & Verbeek, 2013). After a thorough explanation of these concepts in the first day of the workshop, the students were sent out to find examples of designs and situations that could reflect these different visions in public space. Figure 2 shows some examples of images that the students presented after this exercise. The café-table with raw planks is a typical example of a restorative utopia where the connection with nature stands for honesty in material use and craftsmanship, resulting in what is supposed to be an improved experience of ‘being human’. The public bike sharing system on the right is a fine example of the socially-functionalistic perspective on society; all the bikes are the same and the user has to obey to the system (taking out and putting back the bike in a pre-defined place) to make it work. The electric scooters in the middle are part of a sharing system without docking stations. The latter is improving the user experience on an individual human scale, however the students also recognised that the individual behaviour of users was a cause of collective nuisance, because of discarded or abandoned scooters scattering around the streets. This led the student group to rethink and redesign the system in the second part of the workshop.



Figure 2. Examples of Utopian Design that were collected outside the classroom by the students: restorative, technology-at-human-scale, and socially-functionalistic.

Results

The results of the workshop ranged from an open electric scooter-sharing system to a bus-stop that fosters ethical discussion (Eggink, in print). The interesting thing is that specifically in the

ideation phase of the design process, the inherent world-views of the four Utopian Design movements are very visible. By connecting the design proposals with the respective design movements, the possible positive and negative effects of the solution could be easily identified and envisioned. The design history knowledge in this sense served as a lens towards the possible future (mis)use scenarios of the proposed designs. Especially with the electric scooter-sharing system, the project showed how in a very early stage of development the possible behaviour changing effects of the design could work-out in the end, and relevant side-effects and ethical issues could easily be revealed.

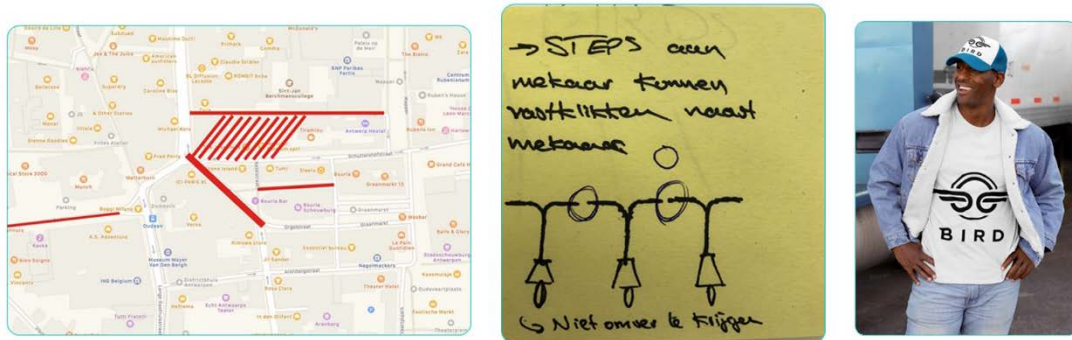


Figure 3. Visuals of ideation for solutions on the problem of nuisance by an electric step sharing system (by Kobe Baudewijns, Emile Cognie, Pieter De Beucker & 1 other student).

Some examples of the ideas presented by the student group working at the electric scooter system are shown in figure 3. One might say that due to the priming exercises with utopian design, the presented solutions differed heavily. The first solution, depicted on the right is based on the principle that the scooter system itself will not allow to discard them in an unwanted place (the red areas). This can be seen as a correction on the technology-at-a-human-scale solution, where the responsible behaviour is build-in in the technology itself. The students recognised that this is then actually also a movement in the direction of the socially-functionalistic utopia, because the user has to obey to the system. Moreover, problems may arise when the system is not absolutely clear in communicating the ‘forbidden’ areas. In that sense it is ethically even worse than the design of the bike-sharing system with docking stations. The latter is a so-called coercive design, where one has to obey to the rules of the system in according to have it ‘work’ for the user. However, the presence of the docking stations is clear and in that sense transparent to the user. If the system of docking stations is replaced by an invisible, virtual ‘docking system’ the user has to obey to a system that can be characterized as an ‘invisible enemy’.

The second solution, sketched in the middle was geared towards cooperation. The scooters could only be discarded by connecting them to another scooter, thus resulting naturally in the socially-functionalistic ideal of ‘neat’ rows of scooters. This would also prevent them from falling over, which was unwantedly associating them with rubbish. The last solution depicted here was based on stimulating preferable behaviour by incentives. The ‘good’ user would be rewarded with specific merchandise. This is very much related to the diversity-of-lifestyles utopia, where the user remains totally free to choose their behaviour. The idea was also that the users behaving properly would become natural ambassadors for the scooter system. This led eventually to a new discussion whether this was desirable. By being connected to the brand, the ambassadors could also become held accountable for the misuse of others.

This paper leaves no room to show all the results of the student groups, however I hope that I have given the reader a sneak peak in how the Utopian Technology inspired exercises informed the design investigation of the students in a natural and practical way. In my opinion, this is by showing them the dilemmas connected to design, coming directly from their own results in practice. Historical precedents are then helpful in envisioning the consequences - especially the (unpredictable) behaviour of people. By doing so, I also hope to stimulate their intrinsic interest in design history knowledge as a relevant part of their designer skill set. In analogy with the concept of cultural capital, I call this knowledge their 'design capital'.

Discussion

This project shows in a nutshell how design can make tangible the inherent dilemmas and conflicts in designing for public space, where collective responsibilities and individual concerns often collide. Supported by knowledge and examples from design history from the Utopian Technology approach, this led to both a high amount and a high level of ethical discussions during the week. In my opinion it did not so much lead to better designs in the sense that they would be readily applicable, however the students were in the end very profound in explaining the dilemmas around their designs and in defending their decisions.

In interpreting the positive results of the workshop one should however take into account a possible bias in the group of students as they all applied voluntarily for a workshop about responsible design. So one might expect that they were also more than averagely interested in ethical dilemmas in design. However, there was no mentioning of ethics in the first place. It is that with the practicing of responsible design, the ethical discussions come naturally to the fore.

In the end, the experiences were more interesting than the results, although in my opinion the experiences could not have been so interesting without the intermediate design results. This is what we call the reciprocal effect of the combination of design with philosophy of technology: the conceptual designs are informed by the reflective analyses from in this case Utopian Technology. While in turn, the ethical reflections are informed by the practical examples of the concrete design proposals.

Conclusion

Apart from having interesting design results, the project shows how the students used the historic precedents in their design explorations. On the other hand, the design solutions in turn helped shaping their understanding of design history. This is what we call the inherent reciprocal effect of the Practical Turn (Eggink & Dorrestijn, 2020); the materialization and visualization of ethical and social issues through design -based on the reflection from the philosophical tools and theories- in its turn explicates the philosophical reflection.

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Biography

Dr. Ir. Wouter Eggink is assistant professor, especially interested in the relationships between design, technology, and society. He is coordinator of the master programme Human-Technology

Relations. Eggink researches human-technology relations both from a history and future perspective. His approach is based on the collaboration between design research and philosophy of technology, for which he coined the term “the practical turn”.