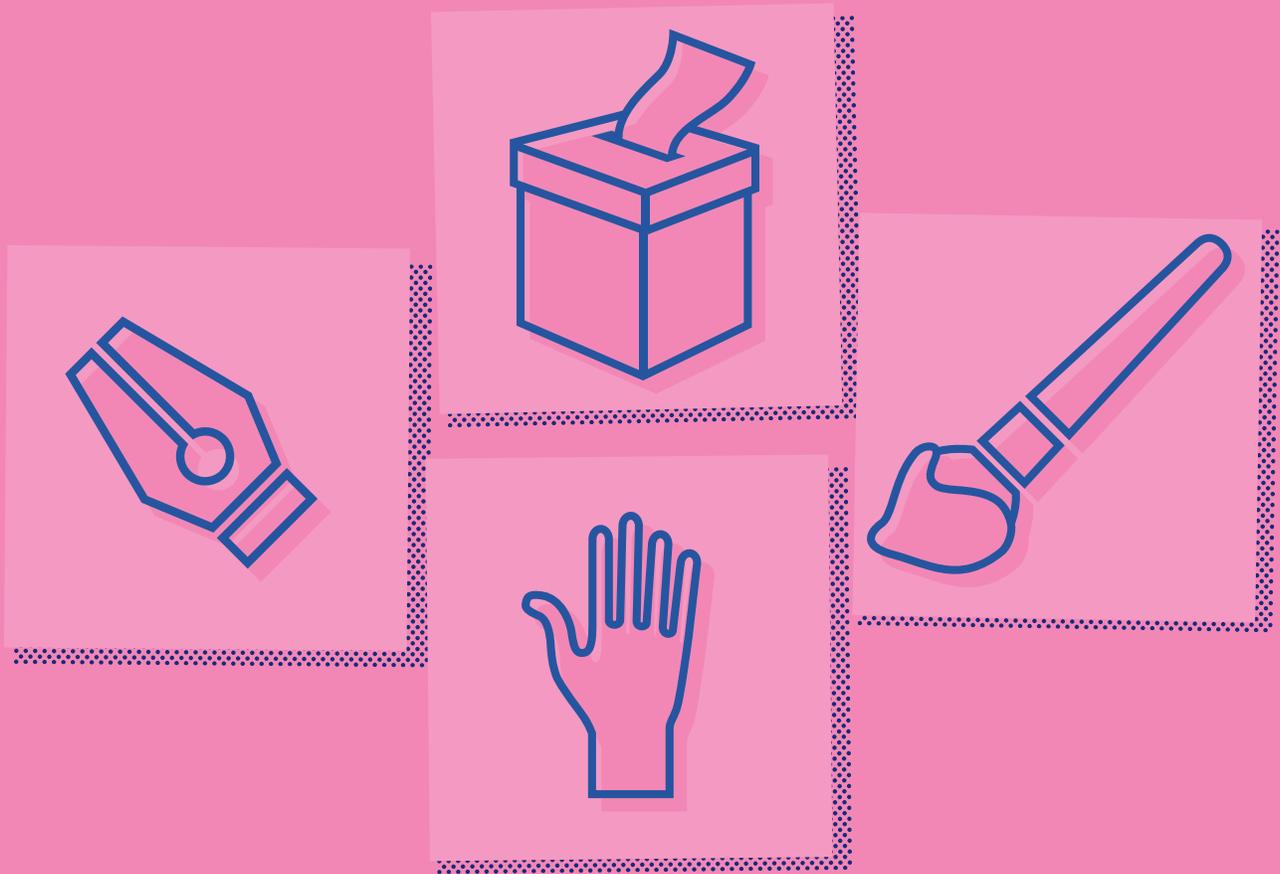


The Ballot and the Pixel

Improving human-centered design frameworks with community organizing and activist principles

Commons-Centered Design

a framework from Design Activist Institute



DESIGNERS WHO RESIST

February 25, 2020

Design
Activist
Institute

The Design Activist Institute is a Philadelphia-based grassroots collective of designers working for radical, utopian resistance and building a better world. The Institute combines collective design with collective power, bringing experience with community organizing and horizontal, base-building tactics to the world of co-creative design.

To many designers working today, human-centered design frameworks like design thinking are almost like a second language, but fewer have experience community organizing.

Issues-based, activist design collectives centralize the community in the creative process, not just as research or interview subjects. Design activists prioritize the voices of organizers who are most impacted by social and environmental issues at the core of group determination.

In Commons-Centered Design, designers apply direct democracy to collaborative design. Before Commons-Centered Design can be defined, the Institute offers a critique of one popular human-centered design framework, design thinking.

A CRITIQUE OF DESIGN THINKING

Design thinking is a framework, commonly described as a system of strategies for discovering new concepts or novel solutions in the problem-solving role of design. Some of its benefits include its process for defining problems, its orientation towards innovation, its ideation, prototyping, and testing functions, and its focus on proving concepts and models. The design thinking framework is iterative, and when executed properly requires upwards of weeks or months, depending upon the type of work.

As developed by numerous groups and individuals throughout the latter half of the 20th century, design thinking is typically thought of as having five circular stages: empathy, definition, ideation, prototyping, and testing. These help groups frame how to find inspiration, discover ill-defined problems, plot courses of action, communicate ideas quickly, and gather feedback on concepts.

Design thinking places others at the center of its focus, is strategic and results-oriented while still allowing for creativity and innovation. In the service of capitalism, design thinking is a powerful tool.

In the struggle for liberation and in seeking true justice for people and the planet, design thinking must be reformed.

Corporate efficiency

Design thinking is intrinsically twinned with corporate efficiency, but the business of revolution is messy, chaotic, joyful, free, and beautiful, prioritizing effective long-term struggle for the working class over short-term time-saving gains. Community organizing and activism should be aimed towards transcendent moments of human creativity and freedom, whether found in wheatpasting posters about corrupt local politicians, replacing an industrial polluter's website on their domain with new content, or just a lively debate about antifascist tactics. Efficiency essentially amounts to cutting corners in capitalist systems where organized teams might be motivated but are not as fully invested in the outcome as they would be if they were working for the greater good. Revolutionaries strive to make the world a better place, and for this reason efficiency should not be confused with effectiveness.

The language of commerce

Design thinking frames the "audience" as "users" and some of its goals framed as "return on investment." Even references to "product development" throughout design thinking do not translate well to social justice. These and other commonly-used phrases in design thinking are cold terms, and in activism, projects ideally benefit the entire natural world. Narrowing the "audience" in an activist project is often a hindrance, depending on the nature of the venture. Instead, Commons-Centered Design adopts the vernacular of community organizing: resistance, revolution, liberation, freedom, and cooperation.

Patronizing strategies

The most abundant problem with design thinking, and in particular where it interacts with issues-based work, occurs right up front during the empathy phase. Empathy, as a personality trait, is of course central in all design work, but the empathizing process as defined by design thinking essentially requires designers to make decisions on behalf of others. This strategy counterintuitively reinforces colonialist, authoritarian, white supremacist strategy, and directly relates to the design industry's challenges with diversity. Typically, this stage involves observation and interviews. Even with the later testing phase of design thinking in place as a check on the assumptions from this "empathizing" strategy, this tactic is too elitist for Commons-Centered Design, as it positions the designer outside of and above the working class.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Simply put, in Commons-Centered Design the strategies of design thinking are interwoven with a refined structure of direct democracy. Commons-Centered Design expands the structure of the design thinking process to involve neighbors directly in co-creation, as revolutionary organizations do, improving these methods while maintaining the underlying human-centered design concept.

Commons-Centered Design strives to be clear, self-aware, inclusive, and to create a platform for civil discourse between those involved, helping all participants feel heard.

Building collective power

People-powered community organizations carefully leverage a revolutionary strategy focused on expanding the awareness of issues that cause inequality, what it means to be a worker (or working class) today, and the ways in which private owners of companies exploit workers and lobby governments for policies that make it legal for them to continue doing so. People power comes from the coherence of working class people from entirely different backgrounds in common struggles and focused projects.

Why collective power?

The Design Activist Institute contemplates and is driven by the largest philosophical questions that humanity will have to face in the future: climate breakdown is the most obvious and possibly the most existential, but questions about consciousness, collective rationality, sharing knowledge, the advancement of technology and machine learning, and true global social justice are all just as important challenges. Simply voting for a favorable outcome around any of these will be mostly impossible, especially since the fate of democracy itself is one philosophical issue at hand.

If democratic institutions continue to break down, what is left? Many acts of civic engagement are available to a hopeful activist, many of which can be even more effective than voting and all of which aggregate into harmonious revolution.

A better world is possible. All throughout history, the biggest transformations were not handed down by powerful people after the masses asked politely for them. They had to be fought for, and won: child labor rights, the weekend, the eight-hour workday. Change on the scale of societal systems requires a mass movement of diverse people united behind a shared vision of this better world.

Methods for social change

There are essentially three broad approaches to people-powered change, and they range in both effectiveness and difficulty.

Authoritarianism is the easiest route to change but is also the least effective for permanent liberation. The system of aligning revolutionary hopes under a popular, strong, authoritarian leader who lead the people to the transformations they want is a direct corollary to a loss of rights. In U.S. culture, it is a tradition to show deference to authority figures like teachers, religious leaders, police, the military, the ultra-wealthy, and bosses. This extends to the political life of most Americans. It is tempting to fall for this ploy for short-term gains, but it quickly returns society to the status quo, and promptly leads to worse.

Activist networking is an appealing but opposing strategy for politically engaged people. In this approach, groups of activists seek to make change – often on single issues – by partnering with non-profit organizations to lend their support to the efforts and activities of these groups. These endeavors usually take the form of charity, sanctioned coalition rallies, or lobbying. Their goals might consist of legal change through the support of a particular bill, getting out the vote, or sustaining the non-profits themselves. As the news cycle continues and legislative changes either fail to materialize or fail to produce palpable results, activists who engage in this process often risk burnout.

Community organizing offers an alternative path. In this approach, organizers create autonomous projects that tie political action to daily life, in collaboration with coworkers, neighbors, families, commuters, and friends in moments of joy and recreation. These groups discuss ways in which ordinary individuals without any real political power can carefully research and plan their own small initiatives, which link with other autonomous groups of people and tying them all into mass movements. These tactics aim to permanently coalesce the working class by returning power to the people. Through group determination, the people choose their battles and ultimately decide how they will autonomously win, through actions like labor strikes, détournement, tenants unions, commuter fare strikes, occupations, events, parties, and protests.

This advanced type of community organizing is difficult work and takes a tremendous amount of patience, but in the future this will be how progressive change will be made. While the youngest generations in the U.S. are the most progressive the country has ever seen, devices that keep power in the hands of the ultra-rich – like gerrymandering, the Electoral College, the Citizens United decision, and offshore tax havens – ensure that the thrust of U.S. politics legitimize and legalize conservatism. People have the power to organize for solutions to the climate crisis, violations against the human rights of migrants, people of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ people, inequality, and class war waged by the powerful against the people.

DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN DESIGN

Basing the problem-solving process on a foundation of community organizing eliminates the need for designers to play make believe about what others might think, say, do, or feel as outlined by design thinking. Other frameworks, like Participatory Design and Co-Design, offer similarly democratic structures, but largely seek resolutions through commercial systems. People organize using Commons-Centered Design to be a part of organic, sustained and strategic direct action, and to eliminate time wasted imagining issues to tackle, misdefining problems, and ideating ill-conceived solutions in other frameworks. Structured co-operation, debate, and collaboration helps refine and improve ideas earlier and faster.

Building consensus

Revolutionary community-run movements often employ a form of direct democracy through some decision-making procedure which attempts to find consensus or quorum. In mass organizing there are plenty of valid criticisms of consensus, especially if practiced inconsistently. However, in Commons-Centered Design, consensus is radical and achievable. Environments in which people might achieve consensus with one another are fleetingly foreign to the everyday experiences of most people in the U.S. today. Designers, especially those accustomed to creative critique, have the power to transform consensus-building into a nurturing, supportive process.

Based on *Robert's Rules of Order*, the Design Activist Institute developed a set of rules modified for the timeframe, small scale, and creative nature of collective design work. *Robert's Rules* is a textbook for meeting organization that is used by groups as wildly disparate as parliamentary governments and anarchist syndicates.

When designers within the collective bring a proposal to the group, they undertake the process on the following page. The benefit of following this process is that it leaves room for the rules and procedures within it to change and transform via debate. This is a living document.

Basic rules

Accommodations for accessible procedure, such as interpreters or translators, must be provided

Participants in the debate get on stack by raising their hands, and the facilitator adds their name to the list

Single-turn stack option: no one speaks twice during a round unless everyone has spoken

Progressive stack option: the voices of marginalized people are prioritized in the stack by the facilitator

The facilitator calls on participants from stack to speak in turn

Participants must attempt to refrain from making statements during questions, as they will have the opportunity during other parts of the discussion

Statements are used to test for consensus or to refine the proposal

Glossary

STACK an ordered list of participants who wish to speak in turn

MOTION a suggestion from a member of the collective that the group take a certain action

SECOND an agreement with a motion, which only requires a participant to call out or sign "seconded"

PROPOSAL an idea for a creative project, initiative, or amendment to the way the collective organizes

FACILITATOR an organizer who is responsible for beginning and ending the debate process, managing stack, asking for seconds, and managing the procedure

NOTETAKER an organizer who is responsible for recording the minutes of the meeting and amending the proposal

QUORUM typically, quorum is a majority of membership in an organization (50% plus one)

PASSING VOTE a proposal without any blocks or votes against, only abstentions or votes in support

CONSENSUS unanimous agreement reached after amendment and debate

DESIGN COLLECTIVE PROCEDURE

The Commons-Centered Design rules of order for proposal review are adapted from design critique and *Robert's Rules*. For clarity and brevity, this is but a brief outline. This procedure may sound very formal, but the group should keep debate light, open, supportive, and inclusive, with the more knowledgeable and experienced organizers helping newcomers through the process, answering questions about procedure as they go.

Proposals

- Proposals are written by participants or groups of participants from the collective. Based on the artistic nature of design, inspiration strikes individuals in many different ways and so creative proposals are typically prepared outside of the collective meeting or workshop structure and brought in. The author or a representative from the group who authored the proposal reads it aloud to the group, sometimes with visual aids projected or printed and pinned to the wall.
- The facilitator announces the start of the proceedings.

Clarifying questions

- Discussion begins with clarifying questions from participants about the proposal.
- The facilitator is responsible for calling on participants in order from stack.
- Participants direct clarifying questions towards the author of the proposal, and the author or authors are obliged to answer to the best of their abilities.

Motion to proceed to statements

- When all have asked questions or passed on their turns, a participant may motion to proceed to debate.
- Another participant is required to second this motion.

Statements

- Participants make statements of support, friendly amendments, or raise concerns.
- Any friendly amendments suggested during this round require a second.
- If the proposal is amended, the notetaker reads the new proposal aloud for continued debate.
- This usually only returns the group to questions for a brief time regarding only the amendment.

Motion to proceed to vote

- Participants may motion for a vote at any time during debate after all have had a chance to speak or passed on their turns.
- Another participant is required to second this motion.

Voting

- Participants may vote yes, no, or to abstain.
- By default, voting is done by ballot unless participants motion for a quick up, down, or abstention through a show of hands.
- A motion to vote by a show of hands requires a second.
- Participants may also motion for a hard block in opposition to the proposal at any time if the proposal goes against the interests or principles of the group.
- A motion for a hard block requires a second.

Outcomes

- If the proposal is blocked but may be resolved with further amendments, it is revised, the question and statement process is repeated, and voted on again.
- If the proposal cannot be resolved, it is laid down either permanently or for future consideration.
- If the proposal passes, it is written into the project record and recorded in the minutes.

Notes

Like any other rules, rules of order are made to be broken, but should be done so thoughtfully and with the agreement of the group.

A passing vote is typically reached by a quorum of the total number of members (including those not present), but the Institute uses consensus agreement of those present instead to pass a vote. It can be difficult for any volunteer-based organization to reach quorum at meetings or workshops, and the Institute does not manage formal membership rolls from which to calculate quorum.

Any and all motions in *Robert's Rules* not mentioned here, such as a Parliamentary Inquiry or to Raise Questions of Privilege, should be honored if put forth by a participant knowledgeable in the procedure. All participants are encouraged to become familiar with parliamentary procedure.

BUILDING COLLECTIVE POWER

Commons-Centered Design implicitly enhances the strategies of a human-centered design framework undertaken by a people-powered design collective. It almost completely replaces the empathy strategy altogether in seeking out issues as defined by design thinking, and infuses the definition and divergent and convergent ideation phases with democracy. While this is most useful for processing project proposals, this framework underpins everything that the Design Activist Institute does.

Combining democracy and design thinking

Design collectives should be open to everyone who seeks creative solutions to social issues, not just formally-educated, professionally-trained designers. Commons-Centered Design especially includes those who are most affected by issues, and their voices should be elevated in debates about group determination.

1 The directly democratic process of proposal, debate, and vote is used to identify key issues, define problems, and discover potential solutions. Commons-Centered Design leverages the divergent and convergent patterns of ideation in design thinking, but should incorporate consensus-building tactics from community organizing into this process as well.

2 After the collective passes through their own modified version of community organizing, Commons-Centered Design advances the group to a standard design-centric prototyping process, beginning the iterative technique familiar to anyone who has practiced design thinking. Prototyping, in turn, leads to the discovery of additional concepts which can return the collective to the democratic ideation phase.

3 Once the group builds consensus around their prototypes, Commons-Centered Design moves to the testing phase. In this phase, the collective looks again to community organizing practices to ensure that proposed solutions will be impactful, positioning affected populations as stakeholders and soliciting feedback from partners. The results of testing their design helps the collective refine new concepts and redefine problems, solutions, and points of view.

Design collectives, as a result of adopting Commons-Centered Design, fold themselves into larger mass organizing movements to work towards actively building a better world through social change and environmental justice.

For more information or for any questions or advice on the Commons-Centered Design framework, contact the Design Activist Institute at designactivist@protonmail.com or designactivistinstitute.org

The rules of order themselves have great depth, and what is covered here is particularly developed for efficiency in design collectives. For more information about *Robert's Rules of Order*, including comprehensive lists and tables of motions, definitions of assembly, privilege, sessions, and other specifics pertaining to parliamentary procedure, see rulesonline.com

For an example of how people-powered community organizations use rules of order, see the Neighborhood Anarchist Collective Democratic Procedure at neighborhoodanarchists.org/facilitation



**Design
Activist
Institute**