Design Activism: The Social Construction of Reality of the 1960s

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ABSTRACT

Design activism, as a cultural and political movement, emerged in the 1960s as a response to social, environmental, and political upheavals. This article examines the relationship between design activism and the social construction of reality, particularly focusing on how designers in the 1960s utilized design to challenge societal norms and construct new realities. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's social construction of reality, Michel Foucault's power/knowledge, and Anthony Giddens's structuration theory, the article explores how design practices functioned as tools of resistance and cultural transformation. The article delves into key movements of the time, including the Whole Earth Catalog, the Radical Design Movement, and the experimental environments of Drop City, and how these design actions reflected the utopian struggles of the period. By examining design as a vehicle for social change, the article highlights the role of the designer not only as a creator of objects but as an activist shaping the world around them.

Keywords: Designer, Design activism, Social construction of reality, Anthony Giddens, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Michel Foucault.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 1960s was a period of seismic cultural, political, and social upheaval. From the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam War protests to the rise of countercultures such as the hippie movement, young people in the United States and Europe rejected traditional values, questioning consumerism, war, and inequality. Amid this global wave of protests and reform, design began to take on a new role, transitioning from a discipline focused on aesthetics and functionality to one with a deeper political and social agenda. Designers in the 1960s began to challenge the dominant power structures through their works, using design as a means of promoting alternative lifestyles, eco-consciousness, social equity, and cultural liberation.

Design activism in the 1960s was more than just a trend in the arts and crafts; it was a cultural revolution in how people perceived the role of design in their lives. It was about constructing new realities, shifting social narratives, and rejecting the traditional models of production, consumption, and societal organization. Today, design activism has emerged as a movement, it picks up and runs with some of its key themes, including intensification, co-articulation, temporality, and territorialisation [1].This article explores how design activism can be understood through the lens of social construction, focusing on how designers, as active participants in social change, used their work to challenge established norms and create new cultural frameworks.

2. FRAMEWORK: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION THEORY

The concept of the social construction of reality, as articulated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in The Social Construction of Reality (1966), provides a foundational theoretical framework for understanding how reality is shaped through human interaction, language, and social processes. According to Berger and Luckmann, reality is not a fixed entity but is continuously constructed through social practices and shared understandings. This construction happens at both

the micro-level (individual interactions and experiences) and the macro-level (cultural, institutional, and social norms).

The social construction of reality involves a three-step process: (1) Externalization: This stage refers to the process by which individuals and groups create or give meaning to their world through actions, symbols, and language. Through design, individuals express their interpretations of the world, which are then shared with others. (2) Objectivation: At this stage, the meanings that were created and shared become "objective reality"— something that exists independently of the individual. In the context of design, this could be seen when new ideas or social values (such as sustainability, freedom, or equality) become institutionalized or ingrained in culture through material objects, spaces, and symbols. (3) Internalization: This step involves individuals adopting these objectified meanings as part of their worldview, shaping how they interact with their environment, perceive their role in society, and live their lives[2].

Anthony Giddens's Structuration Theory suggests that social structures are not simply constraints on individual actions but are produced and reproduced through individual practices[3]. Giddens emphasizes the dynamic relationship between agency (individual actions) and structure (the broader social systems that shape these actions). This theory challenges the idea of society as a static, deterministic force and instead views it as being in constant flux, shaped by the interplay of individual actions and social institutions.

Michel Foucault argued that power is not only centralized in institutions like the state, but it is also diffuse, embedded in everyday practices, and constructed through discourse. According to Foucault, knowledge and power are intimately linked, and institutions and individuals are controlled through what he calls technologies of power (e.g., disciplinary practices, surveillance, and normalization)[4]. These discourse systems define what is considered truth and normality in any society.

Michel de Certeau's work on tactics in everyday life provides a lens to examine how individuals and groups negotiate, adapt, and resist the structures imposed on them by larger social forces. According to de Certeau, the everyday practices of individuals — what he calls "tactics"—are forms of resistance to the dominant strategies imposed by institutions and power structures[5]. While strategies are planned and systematic actions carried out by dominant powers, tactics are flexible, opportunistic actions taken by individuals in their daily lives.

Design is an essential part of this process, functioning as both an externalization and objectivation tool. Designers actively shape the meanings of everyday life, giving form to the world around them, from the objects they create to the spaces they design. Through their work, designers help shape the cultural norms and ideologies that individuals internalize and perpetuate in their daily lives. In the 1960s, design activism aimed at reconstructing social realities by creating objects, spaces, and systems that represented alternative values—such as ecological sustainability, communal living, and anti-consumerism—that were in direct opposition to the dominant capitalist and industrial norms.

3. THE EMERGENCE OF DESIGN ACTIVISM

Design activism, particularly in the 1960s, can be seen as a response to the growing disenchantment with mainstream society and its values. With rapid technological advancements, mass production, and consumer culture dominating much of the Western world, many designers became increasingly aware of the ethical implications of their work. Some felt compelled to challenge the status quo, particularly in response to the growing environmental crisis, political instability, and the commodification of everyday life.

3.1 Counterculture and Anti-Consumerism

In the late 1960s, the counterculture was at the forefront of the social revolution, and design played a key role in communicating its values. The Hippie Movement, which was deeply intertwined with anti-war sentiments, environmentalism, and the rejection of consumerism, used design to broadcast its ideals. Colorful, psychedelic posters, murals, and alternative graphics became emblematic of the movement, often featuring bold colors, organic shapes, and politically charged messages.

In the context of the counterculture of the 1960s, design activism became a means to resist consumerism, militarism, and the alienation that came with mass industrialization. The counterculture, which was particularly influential in places like San Francisco, Paris, and Milan, was rooted in rejecting the conventional societal

structures. Designers began to use their work as a form of protest against the capitalist system, with particular attention to the ways in which mass-produced objects were contributing to environmental destruction and the commodification of human life.

Designers aligned with the counterculture began to question the traditional role of design in consumer capitalism. Instead of creating products meant to encourage material consumption, they aimed to create designs that would communicate a message — whether it was peace, sustainability, or resistance to war. These efforts represented a shift from design as a mere commercial activity to design as a means of cultural resistance.

3.2 Radical Design Movement

In Europe, particularly in Italy, the Radical Design Movement emerged as a direct challenge to industrial design and consumer capitalism. The movement included designers like Ettore Sottsass and groups like Superstudio and Archizoom, who rejected functionalism and embraced experimental design that questioned traditional assumptions about art, culture, and consumerism. Their work was an explicit critique of modern life and a reflection of the desire to break free from traditional design standards.

One of the most iconic symbols of the Radical Design Movement was Sottsass's creation of the Memphis Group, which introduced brightly colored, bold geometric shapes, and asymmetrical designs to challenge the cold, sterile designs of modernism. These works were not intended for mass production but as provocative statements — meant to disrupt the complacency of consumer culture.

The Radical Designers aimed to create objects that not only served a functional purpose but also conveyed strong political statements. They rejected mass production and the consumption-driven motives of the corporate world, instead emphasizing individualism, self-expression, and the empowerment of users through design.

4. DESIGNER AS AN ACTIVIST

The role of the designer shifted in the 1960s from someone who merely creates functional and aesthetically pleasing objects to someone who uses their work to engage in social activism. In the context of design activism, the designer's role became that of an activist, a change-maker who could use design as a tool to reshape social and cultural realities. Designers in the 1960s began to use their work as a tool for resistance. This was seen in the proliferation of political posters, public art installations, and furniture design that conveyed messages of peace, equality, environmentalism, and anti-war sentiment. These designers did not create objects to satisfy mere aesthetic desires; instead, their works challenged dominant societal norms and encouraged others to think critically about the world around them.

4.1 Buckminster Fuller and the Vision of a Better World

One of the most influential figures in design activism during this time was Buckminster Fuller. Known for his visionary ideas, Fuller viewed design as a means to solve global problems. He believed that the designer's role was to innovate solutions to humanity's pressing issues, such as poverty, resource scarcity, and environmental destruction.

Fuller's most iconic work, the Geodesic Dome, is an example of his belief in design's power to make the world better. His designs were not just functional—they were symbols of a utopian future where technology and design could be harnessed for the common good. Fuller's work bridged the gap between architecture, sustainability, and social activism, inspiring generations of designers to think more holistically about their role in shaping society.

4.2 Stuart Brand and the Whole Earth Catalog

In the United States, Stuart Brand's Whole Earth Catalog (1968-1972) became a key vehicle for promoting the ideals of the counterculture. The catalog was a compilation of resources related to sustainable living, alternative lifestyles, and self-sufficiency[6]. It featured tools for building, farming, and creating with a focus on ecology, self-reliance, and low-tech innovation.

Brand's catalog was not just a design publication; it was a manifesto of sorts, promoting a DIY ethic and a return to simplicity and sustainability. Through this catalog, Brand sought to democratize access to tools and knowledge, empowering individuals and communities to design their own futures without relying on large corporations or centralized power.

4.3 Victor Papanek and Socially Responsible Design

Victor Papanek, an industrial designer, is widely known for his advocacy of socially responsible design. In his influential book, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (1971), Papanek argued that designers had a moral obligation to create products that were socially useful and environmentally responsible. He criticized the design industry for prioritizing aesthetics and profit over human well-being and the environment, and argued that designers had a moral responsibility to design for the people and the planet, not for profit [7].

Papanek's ideas helped to pave the way for eco-design and sustainable practices in the 1970s and beyond. He advocated for design solutions that would improve lives in the developing world, such as low-cost, easy-to-manufacture products that addressed basic needs without contributing to waste or environmental harm.

5. CONSTRUCTING NEW REALITIES: THE UTOPIAN STRUGGLES OF THE 1960S DESIGN ACTIVISM

Design activism in the 1960s can be seen as part of a larger utopian struggle to create a new social order. The activists of the time believed that by designing alternative systems and restructuring everyday life, it was possible to build a society that was more just, sustainable, and in harmony with nature. As Victor Margolin argues, design should build on a vision of a "Good Society" that could move designers to address real world issues in an open-ended manner[8].

5.1 Design Activism as an Agent of Change

Design activism during the 1960s can be seen as part of this agency within the broader social structure. Designers, through their practices, became agents of change who interacted with and influenced the structures of society, such as consumerism, industrial production, and cultural norms. For example, Buckminster Fuller's designs (including the Geodesic Dome) were not only about creating efficient, sustainable structures but were also agents of social change that challenged the traditional economic and political systems. Fuller's designs aimed to promote a new social order, one that was not based on mass consumption and hierarchical social structures but on global cooperation and sustainable living.

5.2 Design as a Mechanism of Power

Design, for Foucault, can be a form of power that structures how we perceive the world and our place in it. Consumer products, urban designs, and architectural spaces are all manifestations of power that organize social behavior, making certain practices normal while marginalizing others.

In this context, the design activisms were not only counter-cultural expressions but were actively challenging the power structures that dictated the dominant social and economic systems. For example, through the innovative designs of the Radical Designers, such as Sottsass's bold furniture, and the philosophical message of the Whole Earth Catalog, design was used to question the disciplinary mechanisms of society that promoted uniformity, consumerism, and environmental degradation. These were not just alternative design aesthetics; they were alternative ways of organizing society and empowering individuals.

5.3 Tactical Design as Resistance

The 1960s design activism can be interpreted as a tactical resistance against the dominant capitalist and industrial forces. Rather than attempting to overthrow the system entirely, designers used available resources and creative opportunities to subvert and question mainstream culture. This tactical approach is evident in the way that designers like Vico Magistretti and the Memphis Group employed bold forms and unconventional materials, creating designs that were not necessarily meant for mass production but for disrupting conventional consumption patterns and reflecting alternative values.

In the case of the Whole Earth Catalog, the tactical nature of its DIY ethos can be seen as a means of empowering individuals to take control of their own lives and production systems. The catalog's pragmatic solutions to problems, such as building tools for self-sufficiency and environmental responsibility, allowed individuals to escape the dominant power structures of mass consumerism, offering them tactical ways to live differently.

6.　CONCLUSION

The 1960s design activism was a powerful tool for reshaping the social construction of reality. Through the Radical Design Movement, the Whole Earth Catalog, and the utopian spaces like Drop City, designers engaged in a profound cultural revolution that used design as a means to challenge the dominant norms of capitalism, consumerism, and environmental degradation. These movements exemplified how design could be leveraged not just as a form of aesthetics but as a cultural and political tool that empowered individuals to create alternative realities.

As we look back on this era, we see the lasting legacy of these design activists in contemporary movements for sustainable design, social justice, and environmental activism. The 1960s design activism teaches us that design is not neutral; it has the potential to shape our understanding of the world and transform our social realities. Designers, then and now, remain powerful agents of change, able to reconstruct not only physical spaces but also the meanings and values that define how we live in the world.

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