

Design for distributional justice

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Design is a societal function that allocates assets between individuals. Design enables, forces, disables or inhibits people to achieve goals and be somebodies. Physical objects, build environment, communication solutions and services are essential for our abilities to lead lives that are flourishing or at least satisfactory. How these are designed, has an impact on who gets the benefits. Design does not only define artifacts, but design also defines whom they are available and who are influenced by their use.

Human centered design is often seen as a branch of design that walks along with an individual protecting her from the greed of the businessmen or anonymous technology push. While HCD has succeeded, every now and then, in protecting the interests of individuals trying to cope with their work or have meaningful experiences at their leisure time, the question of the impact of design on just distributions has been seldom discussed.

The most well known theories of distribution justice include utilitarianism introduced in its classical form by Jeremy Benthamⁱ and John Stuart Millⁱⁱ, justice as fairness by John Rawlsⁱⁱⁱ and more recently Amartya Sen's^{iv} capability approach. Each of these aims at distributing good things in a manner that the outcome is good on terms about which they disagree. The differences most essentially deal with choosing the units of distribution: Should we focus on happiness, resources or capabilities? Another set of approaches on distribution include the libertarian stands suggesting what one has created and legally acquired belongs to her. Robert Nozick's^v entitlement theory is an example of these.

Theories of distributional justice have been developed to provide theoretical and conceptual support for planning societal order, i.e., legislation, taxation, and social polices. Applying those on design might appear far-fetched. However, design has been moving from stand along objects towards systems, services and recently increasingly deals with governance and new forms of democracy. When it comes to equal opportunities there is no foundational difference between a fair law and fair transportation services, for instance.

Theories of distributional justice make often a separation between fundamental human rights that are absolute and non-commensurable, and material equality, i.e., distribution of income and property – money for short. Recently the increasing inequality of wealth has received a lot of attention and there is evidence of inequality being a major source for decreased quality of life measured on a range of indicators^{vi} – inequality more than lower GNP. But money is an abstraction and influences on wellbeing through consumed products and services. Consequently, among the societal functions dealing with distributions, design has the special role, opportunity and responsibility to explicitly address the conversion of wealth to quality of life.

Designers committed to a change for the preferred should address the impacts of their work on distributions. Applying theories of distributional justice helps designers to

ⁱ Bentham J (1824/1987). "An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation." In Ryan, A. (ed.), *John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham—Utilitarianism and Other Essays*. London: Penguin Books.

ⁱⁱ Mill, J. S. (1871/1987). "Utilitarianism." In Ryan.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

^{iv} Sen, A. (2010). *The Idea of Justice*. London: Penguin Books.

^v Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.

^{vi} Wilkinson R & Pickett K (2009). *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*. Bloomsbury Press.

more analytically approach the secondary impacts of their work and articulate its impact on development and social justice.