

**Possibilities for  
Thought and  
Action :  
DESIS AT 10**



# Program

The Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability Lab (DESIS Lab) at The New School, presents:

Possibilities for Thought and Action: DESIS Lab's 10th Anniversary

The New School  
Wollman Hall  
65 West 11th St  
New York, NY

February 28, 2020

Since the Parsons DESIS Lab started its work ten years ago, the world of design has evolved. So too have the lenses through which we see, and the ways in which we negotiate, the world, that has shifted as well. From Black Lives Matter to the Me Too movement, from Standing Rock to the global rise of neo-fascism, along with ongoing crises related to war, climate, migration, and the economy, our lives have been marked in profound and unequal ways. Design occupies an odd position where it both contributes to, and works toward ameliorating, the overwhelming, complex

problems we now face. Reflecting on the last decade, this event considers how design intervenes in, and responds to, contemporary contexts and crises. We ask: What is the capacity of design to pose other possible worlds? What are the necessary actions needed to catalyze such change? What can be learned through transdisciplinary collaborations that respond first and foremost to critical issues over the demands of clients, audiences, disciplinary norms and canons? How might a commitment to transdisciplinarity foster creative modes of thought and action?

## SCHEDULE

2pm – 2:15pm

Welcome and Introductions

Tim Marshall

Provost of The New School

Rachel Schreiber

Executive Dean of Parsons School of Design

Cynthia Lawson

Dean of the School of Design Strategies

With DESIS Lab members Eduardo Staszowski, Lara Penin, Nidhi Srinivas, Barbara Adams, and Xavier Acarin

2:15pm – 3pm

One-on-one conversation with

Susan Yelavich and Ezio Manzini

3pm – 3:30pm

Coffee break

3:30pm – 5pm

The Assembly

Participants: Shana Agid, Ahmed Ansari,

American Artist, Wendy Brawer,

Michael Carey, Sasha Costanza-Chock,

Jodi Dean, Pablo Helguera, Carin Kuoni,

Miodrag Mitrašinić, Kristen Morse,

Mari Nakano, David Colby Reed, and

Radhika Subramaniam.

Moderators: John Bruce and Lara Penin

5pm

Reception

Installation reflecting on DESIS Lab's history and projects

Posters and Performance with artists

Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Francisca Benítez, and Amy Khoshbin

# Posters

The DESIS Lab values and has fostered relationships with many artists over the past decade. For this celebration, curator Xavier Acarín invited three artists to contribute newly created or existing work that responds to our contemporary political landscape.

Francisca Benítez’s “Together” uses American Sign Language to express “the gathering” as a force beyond particular identities, Amy Khoshbin has produced a poster that condenses problems related to the upcoming U.S. electoral cycle—themes which will be expanded with a live action during the event. Kameelah Janan Rashheed’s contribution underlines the complexities of communication within affinity groups.



# Archive

Over the past ten years, the DESIS Lab has collaborated with multiple partners to organize and implement various design strategies within the urban sphere. Today we share a selection of items embodying the values, commitments and objectives that have guided the lab’s work. Similar to a time capsule, this archive functions as a physical demonstration of the evolution of ideas that have informed the lab’s efforts over the past ten years.

# Participants and Contributors

SHANA AGID is an artist/designer, teacher, and activist whose work focuses on relationships of power and difference in visual, social, and political cultures. She writes about participatory design practices, design and politics, and design teaching and is a co-developer of Working with People (working-with-people.org), a keyword-based curriculum and website for developing critical pedagogical frameworks for collaborative practices. Shana is also a book artist and letterpress printer whose books and prints combine image, text, and form to explore

spaces of power, desire, landscape, and their narratives. He exhibits work internationally and has books in libraries and collections across the United States. Shana is an Associate Professor of Arts, Media, and Communication at Parsons School of Design and holds an MFA in Printmaking and Book Arts, an MA in Visual and Critical Studies from California College of the Arts, and a Ph.D. in Design from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

AHMED ANSARI has a PhD in Design Studies from Carnegie Mellon

University and is an Assistant Professor of Practice at New York University, where he teaches courses in interaction and systems design, speculative design, critical cultural studies, and philosophy of technology. His research deals with decolonising knowledge production in design theory and history, South Asian histories and genealogies of technology, and design ethics and politics.

AMERICAN ARTIST is an interdisciplinary artist whose work considers black labor and visibility within networked life.

Their practice makes use of video, installation, new media, and writing. American Artist's legal name change serves as the basis of an ambivalent practice—one of declaration: by insisting on blackness as descriptive of an American artist, and erasure: anonymity in virtual spaces where "American Artist" is an anonymous name, unable to be validated by a computer as a person's name. Artist is a 2018-2019 recipient of the Queens Museum Jerome Foundation Fellowship. They are a former resident of Abrons Art Center and EYEBEAM and completed the Whitney Independent Study program as an artist in 2017. They have exhibited at the Museum of African Diaspora, San Francisco; the Studio Museum in Harlem; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and Koenig & Clinton, New York. They have published writing in *The New Inquiry* and *New Criticals* and have been featured in *The New York Times*, *Artforum*, *ARTnews*, and *Huffington Post*. Artist is the art director of the arts and politics publication *unbag*.

WENDY BRAWER is a designer, social innovator, and connector. Based in New York and focused

on community-engaged regenerative design since 1989, she created the original Green Map of New York's environment. Thanks to the involvement of the O2 eco-design encouragement agency, the global Green Map System was initiated in 1995. A pioneer in collaborative internet-based development, Wendy leads the development of the now open source non-profit, its acclaimed universal iconography, inclusive methodology and the locally-led global Green Mapmakers network that has impacted the hometown environment in 65 countries.

An everyday cyclist in NYC, Wendy is involved in numerous climate action collaborations, including placemaking, media, solar and resilience projects, noted at WendyBrawer.com. Wendy has spoken on mapping, community engagement, renewable energy, sustainable and disaster design at scores of conferences and universities. She has been the Designer in Residence at the Smithsonian National Design Museum, a Lower East Side Hero and a TED Resident, among other honors.

MICHAEL CAREY is Coordinator of Justice

Initiatives at Brooklyn Public Library. From 2009-2015, Michael was Executive Director of College Initiative, a community based organization committed to creating and sustaining pathways to and through postsecondary education for formerly incarcerated and court-involved New Yorkers. He was involved in the program from its founding in 2002 and has extensive experience in the design and implementation of reentry education programming, including a nationally recognized peer mentoring program. He co-founded the New York Reentry Education Network and the Interdependence Prison Project and is currently a Studio Associate with the Studio at The Edge of the World, an Australian-based design think-tank, and a Subject Matter Expert for the Department of Education's national Improving Reentry Education project.

SASHA COSTANZA (pronouns: they/them or she/her) is a researcher, designer, educator, and media-maker whose work focuses on networked social movements, transformative media organizing, and design justice. They are currently Associate Professor of

Civic Media at MIT and Faculty Associate at the Berkman-Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. Their new book, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*, was published by the MIT Press in 2020. Sasha is a board member of Allied Media Projects (alliedmedia.org) and a Steering Committee member of the Design Justice Network (designjustice.org).

JODI DEAN is a political theorist working at the interface of communism, psychoanalysis, and networked media. She is the author or editor of thirteen books, including *Blog Theory*, *The Communist Horizon*, *Crowds and Party*, and *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging*.

PABLO HELGUERA is a New York based artist working with installation, sculpture, photography, drawing, socially engaged art and performance. Helguera's work focuses on a variety of topics ranging from history, pedagogy, sociolinguistics, ethnography, memory and the absurd, in formats that are widely varied including the lecture, museum display strategies, musical performances and written fiction. His

work as an educator often intersects with his interests as an artist. The making of his work often reflects on issues of interpretation, dialogue, and the role of contemporary culture in a global reality. This intersection is best exemplified in his project, "The School of Panamerican Unrest", a nomadic think-tank that physically crossed the continent by car from Anchorage, Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, making 40 stops in between. Covering almost 20,000 miles, it is considered one of the most extensive public art projects on record as well as a pioneering work for the new generation of artworks falling under the umbrella of socially engaged art.

CARIN KUONI is a curator, writer, and teacher whose work examines how contemporary artistic practices reflect and inform social, political, and cultural conditions. She is senior director/chief curator of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at The New School and assistant professor of visual studies. Before joining the university, she was director of exhibitions at Independent Curators International and director of The Swiss Institute. Kuoni has curated

numerous transdisciplinary exhibitions presented at institutions in the U.S. and abroad. A founding member of artist collective REPOhistory, she is the editor or co-editor of several anthologies, among them *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America*; *Considering Forgiveness*; *Entry Points: The Vera List Center Field Guide to Art and Social Justice*; *Assuming Boycott: Resistance, Agency, and Cultural Production*, and *Freedom of Speech: A Curriculum for Studies Into Darkness* (forthcoming). She is the editorial director of *The Force of Art: Research from a Global Perspective*, published by Prince Claus Fund, Hivos, and the European Cultural Foundation (forthcoming).

EZIO MANZINI is an Italian design academic and author known for his work on design for social innovation and sustainability. He is Honorary Professor at Politecnico di Milano, Chair Professor at University of the Arts London, and presently Distinguished Professor on Design for Social Innovation at ELISAVA, as well as guest professor at Tongji University and Jiangnan University. Manzini is the

founder of DESIS, an international network on design for social innovation and sustainability (<http://www.desisnetwork.org>). His most recent books include: *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* published by MIT Press 2015 and *Politics of the Everyday* published by Bloomsbury in 2019.

#### MIODRAG

MITRAŠINOVIĆ is an architect, urbanist and author. Miodrag is a Professor of Urbanism and Architecture at Parsons School of Design, The New School university, and Co-Chair of Parsons Graduate Urban Programs. His scholarly work focuses on the role design plays as an agent of social and political change, and as catalyst for critical urban transformations; his research argues for the centrality of designing in the conceptualization, production, and representation of democratic and participatory urban space. His work also focuses on the generative capacity and infrastructural dimensions of public space, specifically at the intersections of public policy, urban and public design, and privatization of public resources. He is the co-editor of *Public*

*Space Reader* (forthcoming, Routledge 2020); *Public Space in a Chinese Megaregion: Contemporary Urban Practices and Design Strategies of the Greater Bay Area* (forthcoming, Routledge 2021); *Cooperative Cities* (Journal of Design Strategies Vol. 8, 2018); editor of *Concurrent Urbanities: Designing Infrastructures of Inclusion* (Routledge 2016); co-editor of *Travel, Space, Architecture* (Routledge 2009); and author of *Total Landscape, Theme Parks, Public Space* (Routledge 2006).

KRISTIN MORSE is the Executive Director of the Center for New York City Affairs, an applied policy research organization at The New School offering solutions to pressing social and economic challenges faced by New York communities. Kristin previously served in leadership positions at the Center for Economic Opportunity and developed and evaluated more than 30 anti-poverty programs.

MARI NAKANO currently serves as the Design Director for the NYC Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity, where she leads the work of the Service Design Studio, the first municipal service design studio in

the nation. Her work explores what design can do for products, services and teams in the social impact space. She has worked in international non-governmental, local government and non-profit spaces for over 13 years. In addition, Mari is a Faculty Thesis Adviser for the School of Visual Arts, Design for Social Innovation graduate program, serves on the Advisory Board for the Civic Service Design graduate minor here at Parsons The New School and is a Design Partner for the International Rescue Committee's Airbel Center. Prior to joining NYC Opportunity in 2017, she served for over 4 years as the Design & Interaction Lead for UNICEF's Office of Innovation, where she designed materials and processes across a multi-disciplinary global team of innovators focused on improving the lives of children around the world.

DAVID COLBY is a system designer, educator, and technologist who builds equity into the architectures of socio-technical systems. David is the co-founder of Foossa, a service design and strategy practice, as well as a lecturer in design and management at Parsons. He has

designed public services for the City of New York, storytelling experiences for the Kigali Genocide Memorial, and financial instruments to advance economic security. David is a past Fellow of the Harvard and MIT's Assembly program, which concerns the ethics and governance of artificial intelligence. David is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), former officer of Manhattan Community Board 6, and past trustee of the Awesome Foundation. David studied cognitive science at Harvard and public policy at NYU, and is pursuing a PhD at the MIT Media Lab. At MIT, David is a member of the Space Enabled research group, which uses space technologies to advance justice on Earth.

**RADHIKA SUBRAMANIAM** is a curator and writer with an interdisciplinary practice. She is Associate Professor of Visual Culture at Parsons School of Design at The New School where she was the first Director and Curator of the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center from 2009-2017. Through text, exhibitions and public interventions, she explores the poetics and politics of crises and surprises, with a particu-

lar focus on cities and crowds, migration, walking, art and human-animal relationships. She is the recipient of a Culture and Animals Foundation grant, an International Visiting Curatorship at Artspace, Sydney, a SEED Foundation Teaching Fellowship in Urban Studies at the San Francisco Art Institute, and artist/writer residencies at The Banff Center, Canada and the Hambridge Center.

**SUSAN YELAVICH** is Professor Emerita, Design Studies, Parsons School of Design, The New School, where she continues to teach in the MFA Transdisciplinary Design program. A Fellow of the American Academy of Rome and the Bogliasco Foundation, she is also a member of the Scientific Committee for Design at the Politecnico di Milano. Her contributions to design and its scholarship span over four decades, including 25 years at Cooper Hewitt Museum. During that time she has published and lectured widely. Among her books are *Thinking Design through Literature* (Routledge, 2019), *Design as Future-Making* (Bloomsbury, 2014), and *Contemporary World Interiors* (Phaidon, 2007).

# DESIS Lab

**XAVIER ACARÍN** is a curator working at the intersection of performance, architecture, and art. His projects have addressed issues related to object performativity, material culture, precarity and globalization, architectural history, and radical thought. His exhibitions and projects have been presented at The New School for Social Research, Elastic City, Chez Bushwick, The Hessel Museum-CCS Bard, Peekskill Project 6, the Abrons Arts Center, ESTE Gallery, Knockdown Center and Unbag-Wendy's Subway in New York, La Ira de Dios/CheLA in Buenos Aires, HIAP

Suomenlinna and Muu Kaapeli in Helsinki and LOOP Festival in Barcelona. He has written texts for exhibitions at P.A.D. Gallery, Galeria Rosa Santos, Galeria ADN, and Participant Inc. His articles, essays, and interviews have been published at *A-Desk*, *Culturas-La Vanguardia*, *Esnorquel*, and *Terremoto*. He has participated as author of the books *Designing Experience* (Bloomsbury, 2014), and *Dear Helen* (CCS Bard, 2014). He teaches at the School of Visual Arts and Parsons School of Design.

**BARBARA ADAMS** is a sociologist whose

interdisciplinary research looks at how knowledge is produced and political action is initiated through art and design projects. She is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of Design Strategies at Parsons and was previously a postdoctoral fellow at Wesleyan University. Barbara co-edited the book *Design as Future-Making*, is co-editor in chief of the journal *Design and Culture*, and is the Associate Director of Research and Academic Initiatives at the Parsons DESIS Lab.

**SCOTT BROWN** is a Ph.D. candidate in



Anthropology at The New School for Social Research and a member of The Parsons DESIS Lab. His research is an ethnographic exploration of the forms of knowledge and practice that constitute social design practice.

JOHN BRUCE is a researcher, strategist, and filmmaker. He is Assistant Professor of Design Strategy at Parsons, where he also serves as Director of the Transdisciplinary Design MFA program. His recent projects and collaborations include: co-directing the documentary film, *End of Life*, the result of 4 years spent with 5 people at various stages of the end of life; and, strategist for The Light Phone, a simple phone that provokes reflection on our relationships with technology and our ability to be present. His work is informed through explorations of presence, proximity, temporality, participation, exchange, identification, reciprocity, invitation, care and hospitality. He was a 2015/16 Fellow at the Graduate Institute for Design Ethnography and Social Thought at The New School.

LARA PENIN is Associate Professor of Transdisciplinary Design at Parsons School of

Design, where she has been director of the Transdisciplinary Design graduate program from 2015 to 2019. A full-time faculty in the School of Design Strategies since joining The New School in 2008, she has taught in the Transdisciplinary Design MFA, the Integrated Design BFA and the Strategic Design and Management BBA programs teaching studios, intensive and elective courses involving service design for public interest, systems thinking and participatory methods as well as advising master degree theses. Lara is also a core faculty member of the new Graduate Minor in Civic Service Design. Lara is cofounder of the Parsons DESIS Lab.

NIDHI SRINIVAS is Associate Professor of Management at the Milano School of Policy, Management, and Environment. His research interests center on critical management, civil society and civic innovation. His research has been published in *Organization Studies*, *Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Management and Organizational History*, and included in the *Organization Editors' Picks: Postcolonialism and Voices from the South*.

He has been an Erasmus Mundus research fellow at Roskilde University, BRICS research fellow at the BRICS Policy Institute in Rio de Janeiro, and India-China Institute research fellow at the India-China Institute. He is a visiting professor in the Master's in Social Innovation for Sustainable Development at the University of Turin. Nidhi is cofounder of the Parsons DESIS Lab.

EDUARDO STASZOWSKI is Associate professor of Design Strategies at Parsons School of Design, and Director and cofounder of the Parsons DESIS Lab. He studies design as a method and language, and its role as an intermediary in creating and orienting processes of social innovation and sustainability. He seeks ways to enhance participation in policy development and civic design. A founding editor of *Designing in Dark Times/Radical Thinkers in Design (Bloomsbury)* he has managed the project since its inception in 2017. This carries through (at time of writing) to twelve books in publication, in press and under contract, including *Design in Dark Times: An Arendtian Lexicon*, for which he was co-editor.

# Thoughts on Actions and Possibilities: Reflections from the Co-Founders

The Parsons DESIS Lab (Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability) was launched in 2009 as one of six co-founded entities comprising the global DESIS Network. This network orients their teaching and research activities toward social innovation and sustainability. Based in design schools around the world, today there are over 50 affiliated research labs<sup>(1)</sup>.

Located within the School of Design Strategies at Parsons School of Design, the lab is a hub of pedagogy, practice, and research focused on the intersections of design, management, public policy, and social theory. As a pioneering research group at

(1) The six co-founders of the DESIS network are: the Politecnico di Milano, in Milan, Italy; The New School in New York, USA; University of the Arts London, in London, UK; Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Jiangnan University in Wuxi, China and Tongji University in Shanghai, China. The six

co-founders of the DESIS network are: the Politecnico di Milano, in Milan, Italy; The New School in New York, USA; University of the Arts London, in London, UK; Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Jiangnan University in Wuxi, China and Tongji University in Shanghai, China.

The New School dedicated to theorizing the importance of designing systems-level change, the lab's prime ambition is to advance the study and practice of social innovation, particularly through exploring projects that promote just and sustainable futures. The long-term goal is to explore ways to foster and seed projects for more ecologically-sustainable and socially-equitable cities and everyday practices.

At the time of our launch there were a variety of exciting experiments and interventions in other parts of the world, such as the Transformation Design manifesto at the Design Council's Red unit and the Social Innovation Exchange network in the UK. The Doors of Perception conferences in Europe and India were casting light on design's potential to catalyze socially and sustainable innovations or, what we at the DESIS network called, "creative communities." Perhaps the best example of these social arrangements in New York City was represented by the decades-old community gardens that historically enabled the sharing of information, materials, and resources. Amidst the gloom of the Great Recession, the early days of Barack Obama's presidency suggested that local level community solutions were gaining ground<sup>(2)</sup>.

We understood "creative communities" as based in collective social praxis to initiate alternative ways of living and working within a locality. These creative communities promoted what we called "collaborative services", services that were largely based on peer-to-peer exchanges and the rearrangement of underutilized resources, such as in the case of community gardens<sup>(3)</sup>.

Other examples of collaborative services that interested us at that time included informal cohousing and coworking arrangements, carpooling, group bicycle rides, food coops, tool libraries, parent-led nurseries, time banks, and community gardens. The initial expectation of the DESIS Network and our lab in New York was that introducing design capabilities within localities would help to reorient the way social and urban problems are typically understood by radically extending participation and strengthening existing community-led initiatives by making them more efficient, convenient, and accessible.

Designers could act as intermediaries and trusted agents that use the language, methods, and tools of design to enhance the effectiveness of existing efforts, making these more durable, less

erratic, and more pervasive by helping others take up similar innovations. In the years that followed, we realized that these initiatives could not sustain themselves without becoming a burdensome proposition, especially for residents in low-income neighborhoods with highly vulnerable populations. We recognized the risk that promoting these social innovations might implicitly suggest ways of replacing government services, advancing a neoliberal agenda of reduced government support with responsibilities delegated to communities. At the same time, we started to see our original commitment to collaborative services being slowly co-opted by the so-called "sharing economy," a misnomer that became synonymous with on-demand services mediated by reputation-based apps that monetized and transformed supportive interactions into profitable businesses. To fight the privatization of these remaining forms of commoning and the risk of losing government services, we saw an opportunity for 'lobbying' on behalf of bottom-up community-based initiatives helping them find support within the public sector. We did so using participatory design approaches to affect and transform public services. The progression of our projects reflects this commitment to grassroots and co-design approaches.

Our Amplify project started with a simple agenda: to find examples of people who have taken it upon themselves to innovate new ways of resourcing their everyday lives through various forms of sharing<sup>(4)</sup>. With a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, we initiated research in different New York City neighborhoods, including the Lower East Side of Manhattan

- (2) In 2009 the Obama administration established within the White House the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation to advance opportunity, equality, and justice by identifying evidence-based social programs and providing funds to scale them, relying on social entrepreneurs and non-profits to solve America's escalating social problems.
- (3) The term "creative communities" was coined within the DESIS network by Anna Meroni in 2007 to

- acknowledge groups of people inventing sustainable ways of living and their creative spirit of dealing with everyday problems in ingenious, self-reliant ways. François Jégou and Ezio Manzini coined the term "collaborative service" in 2008 to name forms of service-delivery that relied on collaboration within and between creative communities.
- (4) See <http://www.amplifyingcreativecommunities.org>



and the North Brooklyn neighborhood of Williamsburg, where we used exhibition formats and public programming to engage service and strategic design experts with local community representatives.

Later, we expanded the research to the South Bronx in collaboration with the City Parks Foundation/Partnerships for Parks and then to Brazil as part of the X São Paulo Architecture Biennale. In our first Amplify iteration we looked at the many community gardens in the Lower East Side. The LES is known for being a traditional immigrant and working-class neighborhood suffering from rapid gentrification that risks threatening its rich socio-cultural diversity and affordability. Our expectation was that these long-standing creative communities were sites for other kinds of social innovations and gateways into the less visible peer-to-peer networks active in the neighborhood.

The project positioned the designer as an ‘amplifier’ with a capacity to promote existing grassroots, community-level practices to larger audiences, thus demonstrating how they might be adapted to other urban communities. In this approach, designers are not understood as originators of innovative ideas. Instead, designers model existing and effective grassroots practices, documenting them through visual formats including video, lending design expertise to facilitate adoption of these efforts while extending an invitation to larger audiences through ‘community design studios’ focused on sharing knowledge and skills. The exhibitions functioned as research spaces starting with half empty walls, where results from workshops were incorporated as they unfolded on site. The content of the exhibitions evolved and changed throughout the duration of the project, exploring different ways local communities and publics might form networks for sharing and support. In this process we collaborated with community-trusted, locally-based partners including the Green Map System and the Lower East Side Ecology Center.

In hindsight, we acknowledge the experimental nature of Amplify and understand its contribution as partly methodological, partly epistemological, and partly political. It suggested a new vision of urbanity based on community-based collaboration.

Our political—albeit naive—aspiration was that this approach would support the development and diffusion of new, democratic urban governing practic-

es and push against dominant technocratic and pro-market approaches. Yet, the politics of social innovation and these ‘amplifications’ were complicated, forcing us to reckon with a series of dilemmas and ethical questions. Should people’s ideas be scaled-up or ‘mass produced’ so they might be adopted by others? The idea of scalability is no stranger to designers. It is a practice that emerges in great part through the industrial design tradition and the mass production of goods. In our work, we grappled with the ways in which the mass-production of industrial products is qualitatively different from the proliferation of collaborative services. We also wrestled with the role of the designer as a responsible and responsive collaborator. Should design encourage and nudge people to live differently or should design simply recognize and underscore existing ways of life? We also acknowledged a problem in emphasizing grassroots activities to strengthen communities with a focus on only private actors. We realize now that championing grassroots activities risks reducing government responsibility and the withdrawal of services. The Amplify project surfaced concerns which shaped our work moving forward. This points to the challenges designers face in fully comprehending the unintended outcomes of their work. In this project we learned that volunteerism can be co-opted by both local government and commercialized ‘sharing’ platforms seeking profit.

These issues and challenges led to significant shifts in our research agenda. We began to explore more issues of public governance and urban policy and design’s role within such spaces. During the years following the financial crisis, cuts to public spending led governments across the world to rethink public service delivery and experiment with public-private partnerships and increased public participation. That era also marked the beginning of debates about the relation of design and public service and the connections between social innovation and public policy.

The global proliferation of ‘innovation labs,’ typically housed within the public sector and focused on design, served as a means to solicit user perceptions and create a favorable climate for internal reform of government agencies.

Recognizing these societal and policy trends, our Public and Collaborative research program was created to understand what role design could play in

building forms of collaboration between city government and social innovators in transforming public policies and services<sup>5</sup>. Through a series of projects, small and large, we encouraged such collaborations and participated in the design and delivery of various public services. Our aim was to use participatory design to go beyond instrumental purposes such as public consultation and to critically envisage the challenges of instituting participation as a future norm in governance and public life. Again with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, we established a collaboration with the New York City Department of Housing Preservation & Development with whom we explored, in partnership with the Public Policy Lab, ways to facilitate the involvement of community residents and non-profits in the development and delivery of housing-related services. This work enhanced the affordable housing application process and showed how housing developments can involve new residents in enhancing the mission of our partner agencies as well as strengthen community bonds amongst residents in these communities.

Other projects followed, such as our collaboration with the Office of Innovation at the New York City Department of Education to co-design new approaches to education with students, teachers, families, and administrators in a multi-located, public high school. This project sought to leverage partnerships with businesses, government, and cultural communities to create new places and contexts for learning. This included blended learning and self-paced curricula, to support specific learning outcomes. With the New York City Department of Small Business Services and with the support of the Open Society Foundations, as part of their Future of Work inquiry, we created a futuring framework and design toolkit that enabled our partners to envision and discuss workforce futures. Together we explored scenarios for new types of workforce development services that could benefit New Yorkers in the year 2040 in order to generate new forms of policy and practice in the present. With the Office of Financial Empowerment at the NYC Department of Consumer Affairs, the New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City and with the support of the Citi Community Development, we

worked on three projects centred around the issue of financial instability. We identified a common thread connecting challenges related to health, family, housing, employment, and food security. In response, the first project expanded the uptake of the federal earned income tax credit by making free tax preparation services in New York City more effective and accessible. The second project underscored the economic benefits of becoming a U.S. citizen by weaving citizenship and financial empowerment services together more effectively. We also worked with Financial Empowerment Centers to encourage and sustain more long-term engagement from their clients through the implementation of various design strategies derived from extended, immersive research, prototyping and testing by our team.

As with all our socially engaged design efforts, there were a number of hurdles both epistemological and practical. Our work combined multiple design strategies and creative ways to accomplish tasks, while seeking broader social impact. In a series of writings, we noted that one of the challenges for designers operating in this manner includes the negotiation of their inherent political position as agents of change, accountable not to a client or clients who have engaged them for a specific purpose, but to the diverse needs of broader publics. In this sense, our understanding of social innovation was distinct and differed from congruent approaches such as social entrepreneurship or non-profit management. We involved multiple actors to help us question and blur organizational and sector boundaries, to mark the messiness of civic and social life. We followed activities as they spilled over from one arena into another. We recognize now that most of the proposals involving co-production or collaborative services were not immediately or entirely embraced by the partnering city agencies. While our public sector partners positively valued design—particularly with respect to its potential to identify and fix service inefficiencies—government agencies did not always willingly embrace the role of designer as a catalyst for greater institutional and political change. Differing understandings of the role of design, in terms of instrumental and transformative goals, prompted us as designers to tactically yet responsibly situate our practice in relation to the differing interests of government agencies, community partners, and private individuals. This allowed us to maintain our autonomy

(5) See <http://nyc.pubcollab.org>

and legitimacy while fostering participation and trust in participants.

During the Public and Collaborative projects we regularly discussed how to build capacities and create civic design infrastructures for circulating knowledge to governments and design practitioners as credible change agents. In 2017, we contributed to an important development in building government capacity for design, with the creation in New York City of the first municipal Service Design Studio in the United States, dedicated to improving services for low-income residents.

In our most recent project with the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL), supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, we are continuing our study of civic design infrastructures and their role in facilitating connections among people and public institutions. BPL recently launched a new strategic plan which articulates its commitment to provide a forum for democratic participation, whereby each library branch acts as a de facto community hub to effectively serve the needs of its patrons, particularly those in vulnerable and precarious situations. In recent years, public libraries have emerged as leading institutions and effective providers of reentry services and programs for those impacted by incarceration. Our project builds on the library's plan through design strategies that strengthen existing programs such as a free televisitation service based in branch libraries, which enables family members to stay connected with incarcerated loved ones in City detention centers.

As with earlier projects, we build on existing assets and relationships, exploring how service design can play a role in building bridges between government, local institutions, and publics. Our work with the BPL fosters the development of social networks and civic collaboration in fragmented urban areas. As with all of our projects, this work continues to reshape our approach as we learn through collaboration and the relationships we build in the contexts in which we work. This project has led us to reassess the ways in which we understand the politics of participation, negotiation, inclusion, and democratic decision-making. In particular, this has meant deepening our commitment to a politics of service design based in care and in building solidarity with service workers. We expect the next steps of this work will involve enhancing participation mechanisms through

which library staff at branches can co-create their own modes of service provision and programming. In this project, we are excited to expand our methods in deeper transdisciplinary ways as well as taking a more deliberate stance in working with an institution that is uniquely positioned between the government bureaucratic infrastructure and the communities it serves.

Our work has offered opportunities to develop creative and socially-engaged pedagogical approaches. Through curricular and course development, we have experimented with a variety of teaching and learning strategies that enable students not only to acquire technical capacities in urban analysis and design, but to envision and enact alternative urban imaginaries. During a studio course taught in the fall of 2013 at Parsons' Transdisciplinary Design MFA Program ('New York City Office of Public Imagination') we sought to explore new forms of collaboration and strategies for rethinking relationships between public actors and local communities in order to promote social innovation at the neighborhood level. Students designed a hypothetical governmental agency, finding a place for it inside the existing structure and parameters of city government while imagining design as a catalyst for social innovation. One of the most striking observations we made throughout the course was that students were quick to devise 'interventions' such as programs and services, yet struggled to capture the complexity of relationships in the public sphere. This was not a fault of the students' ingenuity, but reflective of the larger epistemological and instrumental issues that characterize our educational structures. Design studios should be understood as collaborative spaces where design meets complementary actors and skills, promoting a convergence of multiple fields of knowledge and practice. In 2019, we launched a Graduate Minor in Civic Service Design to connect design, social theory, policy and management concepts to address vital political, public, and civic challenges. We see this as an effort to generate a 'critical current' in design<sup>6</sup>. Meanwhile the lab continues to involve students from the Transdisciplinary Design graduate program in its projects through

(6) See <https://www.newschool.edu/graduate-minor/civic-service-design>

coursework and other opportunities.

We are thankful to many interlocutors and participants with whom we have worked over the last ten years and look forward to extending and enriching the work of the lab through new alliances within and beyond the university. Our commitment to social and political change has grown even stronger during the trajectory of our work, despite the challenges presented by the current political milieu. While the political zeitgeist which first gave birth to our work has shifted in dramatic ways over the preceding decade, the DESIS lab is excited to continue to explore new ways to leverage the power of design towards the creation and fostering of more just, equitable, and sustainable urban futures.

In our journey as a design lab, we have been fortunate to have fostered a network of partners, collaborators and funders that have participated in, and observed, the evolution of design for activism and social change. We are very grateful to The New School community (students, administrative staff and faculty) and the generous support of funders such as the Rockefeller Foundation, Open Society Foundations, National Endowment for the Arts and Citi Community Development. A list of organizations with whom we have and with whom we continue to work includes: Centre for Social Innovation, City Parks Foundation/Partnerships for Parks, Green Map System, IDEO, Interaction Design Lab at Cornell University, ioby, Lower East Side Ecology Center, Livework, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, MIT Mobile Experience Lab, No Longer Empty, New York City government agencies including the New York City Department of Housing Preservation & Development, the Office of Innovation at the New York City Department of Education, the New York City Department of Small Business Services, New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs and the Office of Financial Empowerment at the NYC Department of Consumer Affairs as well as the Public Policy Lab, REOS Partners, São Paulo Architecture Biennale, Shareable, Transparency International and the Union Settlement Association. We are lucky to have worked with you all. We also have a long list of affiliated faculty and students research assistants who have been active collaborators throughout our journey.

Lara Penin, Eduardo Staszowski, and Nidhi Srinivas in collaboration with Barbara Adams, Xavier Acarín and Scott Brown, February 2020

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