Developing Citizen Designers

Compiled and edited by Elizabeth Resnick (2016); published by Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, New York, NY, USA; 432 pages, approximately 253 illustrations. ISBN: 9780857856203.

REVIEW BY ANN MCDONALD¹

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Developing Citizen Designers is a well-organized resource, designed to offer meaningful guidance on social design practices via a close, cover-to-cover read or quick access to individual, topic-specific, framing essays, interviews and case studies of university-level, socially and culturally transformative design assignment briefs.

The book can be viewed as an open-ended provocation and imperative to design educators to:

- acknowledge social, theoretical and historical precedents,
- build relationships and facilitate possibilities outside of the classroom,
- be mindful of assumptions and bias,
- strategically use shared methodologies and tool-kits,
- experiment and fail with consideration of community impact and
- be cognizant of student learning objectives,
- incorporate outcomes assessment.

While this may seem a daunting challenge, Developing Citizen Designers offers exemplary guidance.

Elizabeth Resnick's deep experience as a design curator, educator, author, facilitator, and instigator offers an ideal, passionate position from which to call upon, cull and synthesize the diverse array of national and international voices and project-based case studies on offer within Developing Citizen Designers. Her consistent advocacy for graphic design as a tool for social change is broadened through the thoughtful assertion of many expert voices who have been invited to define and reflect on expanded design practices, their histories and genesis in allied fields, and their pitfalls and potentials for positive social impact.

In her essay that prefaces the primary sections of this volume titled "What is Design Citizenship?," Resnick writes that "...designers have both a social and a moral responsibility to use their visual language training to address societal issues either within or in addition to their professional design practice." Later in the same piece she adds, "at its best, design can change, improve, renew, inspire, involve, disrupt, and help solve the 'wicked' problems of this world." These ideas form the foundation of Resnick's definition of what it means not only to be a citizen designer, but what it means to **aspire** to be one. They also provide guidance to those who wish to teach design students to engage in design processes in ways that account for the real needs and wants of diverse groups of people around the world. As Victor Margolin opines in an essay titled "Graphic

BELOW: Book cover *Developing Citizen Designers*, edited by Elizabeth Resnick (2016).

Design Education and the Challenge of Social Transformation” that immediately follows Resnick’s, “...the cultivation of formal judgement—the use of typography, the organization of information, the creation of symbols and logotypes—must now be taught as a means of social communication rather than pure visual techniques.” He goes on to argue that, “the greatest challenge facing design schools today...is contributing to clarifying and sorting out the multiple communication needs of people around the world.”

Developing citizen designers is a complex and varied practice. The wide range of essays, interviews and case studies included in this book broadly communicate its central theme: that there is no one “right” way for practitioners and educators to achieve the goal of developing ourselves as citizen designers, or teaching our students to act as such. This well-edited collection of material makes clear the need for us to seriously consider the varied levels of engagement, commitment, and timeframes needed to initiate, sustain and grow socially responsible and responsive design practices and design education programs. Taken as a whole, the contents of this book effectively argue that the effort necessary to plan and then strive for these goals offers rich learning opportunities and outcomes that align well with the broad qualities recently called for by Meredith Davis in the design of learning experiences: open-endedness, situatedness, responsiveness, position, integration, and assessment.¹

In the book’s foreword, Bernard Caniffie notes the “urgency and need for design to move forward and accept

responsibility,” and engage in and with a diversely populated, intricately structured world to address global challenges. This book offers an open-ended guide to those who choose to address this challenge and be among the emerging number of design educators, students, and practitioners whom he observes are able to comport themselves as a “mix of builder, designer, entrepreneur, and activist.”

The bulk of Developing Citizen Designers is devoted to well-articulated, amply illustrated case studies and essays that are organized into three meta-level “Parts,” each of which is divided into two to three sub-sections of between five and eight pieces. Each sub-section begins with an essay commissioned from one of a group of educators who teach across a wide variety of educational programs. These frame the contents of each sub-section with a critical backdrop that addresses key aspects of social design practice, offering contextual and historical connections and perspectives from relevant fields. Each framing essay, save the one that begins the final sub-section on “Resources,” is further supported by an interview with a design practitioner or educator. These interviews offer more concrete ideas about and examples of what is more broadly described in the framing essays that precede them.

Many of the essays in Developing Citizen Designers point to a broadening of the practice of design for social good that extend beyond visual communication, advocating for the open-ended use of human-centered and participatory design methodologies to co-discover system-based,

- 1 Davis, M. (2011). “Anatomy of a Student Learning Experience,” AIGA Pivot Conference, Phoenix, Arizona, USA, October 2011. Online. Available at: <http://educators.aiga.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/PIVOT.pdf> (Accessed August 17, 2016).

clarifying strategies and outcomes that may or may not result in visual communication artifacts.

The first of the books three parts, titled “Part 1: Designing Thinking” investigates how design and the design process can contribute to positive social and cultural change. It is divided into three sections: “Socially Responsible Design,” “Design Activism,” and “Design Authorship,” with introductory section essays by Andrew Shea, Natalia Ilyin and Steven McCarthy.

“Part 2: Design Methodology” emphasizes active, empathetic methodologies for designing, particularly designing with rather than for, in order to better understand the needs of diverse stakeholders. It is comprised of three sections: “Collaborative Learning,” “Participatory Design,” and “Service Design,” with introductory section essays by Teal Triggs, Helen Armstrong and Michael Gibson.

“Part 3: Making a Difference” offers reflections on fostering responsible, sustainable and equitable engagements. It is divided into two sections: “Getting Involved,” with section essays by Eric Benson, Myra Margolin, and Elisabeth Tunstall and “Resources,” with section essays by Audra Buck-Coleman, Cinnamon Janzer and Lauren Weinstein, Penina Acayo, Gunta Kaza, and Scott Boylston. The Resources section includes a list of downloadable toolkits and frameworks.

The use of the term ‘Design Thinking’ as the title of Part 1 likely refers to design thinking’s use of the design process to further the goal of

better future socio-cultural, economic, political, environmental and technological conditions. But one could readily argue for the inclusion of it as one of the design methodologies situated within Part 2. The author acknowledges that many of the case studies could easily have been “housed” under multiple sections, and that the section classifications “exist primarily for guidance and ease of use.”

The interviews that occur in all but one of the book’s sub-sections reflect the perspectives and approaches of designers from different parts of the world who have incorporated social design initiatives into their professional practice or teaching. Many of their stories point to a particular experience that helped them understand the positive affect that well-framed and actuated, socially transformative design can have in different places in the world. Additionally, the book concludes with a Bibliography that provides significant texts on social design and related topics. The book’s essays present the reader with a contextualization of theories and frameworks related to design for social change, such as the 1964 First Things First manifesto, Movement Action Plan (MAP), Design Anthropology, Service Design, and Collaborative Learning, among others.

Case studies of education modules and projects from a wide range of countries and design education programs include process and outcome visuals accompanied by summaries written in response to the following prompts: Description, Research, Challenges, Strategy, Effectiveness and Assessment. Each case study identifies the

members of its Project Team and the Duration of the Project, and provides critical analysis of the design processes that guided its evolution in ways that reveal both its contextual framework and the strategies employed to address key issues. More logistical specifics regarding Client, Project Title, and Budget are also included in each case study. The projects described vary in scale and scope from individual student projects to single and multi-term (i.e., semester) team projects, through grant-funded projects operated under the authority of research centers that involved faculty and staff who have established and grown sustained connections within communities. Some teams engaged at a hyper-local scale, within the environs of a campus or in close-by neighborhoods, while others worked across universities, cities, cultures and time zones.

The call for case study submittals for possible publication in this book stated the following selection criteria: “case studies [will be considered] that address the belief that design can illuminate a viable pathway as a counter balance to business and commercial objectives while providing the impetus for students to become inspired and enabled to employ their visual and critical thinking skills as a vehicle for social change.”

The quality of the reflections offered throughout the book, and the admission in some cases that project outcomes led to more questions, or that time was too short, or direct access to primary source information or key partners and audiences was limited, provide eye-opening alerts to others who might wish to plan and

operate related initiatives. The reflexive sharing of logistical and outcome successes and failures allow the potential for these case studies to be used as realistic models by other educators. Additionally, the inclusion of the category “Assessment” in each of the case studies is a good first step toward providing the reader with understandings about the actual efficacy and affect(s) of the projects. A useful extension of this type of project reporting and analysis would have involved allowing individual authors to further detail and assess the social, technological, economic, environmental or political impact each project had on design students’ learning outcomes, community partnership missions, community perceptions of the role of design as an effective catalyst for social change, individual end-users’ goals, and design curricula.

The verb ‘Developing’ in the book title suggests an unclear impression beginning to come into focus as pilot projects are developed iteratively, are better understood, assessed longitudinally, shared and finally used as models for multiple approaches and methods for practicing socially transformative design and socially engaged design education. Developing relationships, projects and frameworks demands fluidity, resourcefulness, planning and outreach beyond the educational or professional experiences of many designers. However, if we are challenging students to become citizen designers as a means to improve various aspects of the worlds we and they inhabit and affect, we need to model behaviors informed by thoughtfulness, preparedness, organization, and broadly constituted connections. We need to

scale timeframes to pursue both small and large-scale sustained partnerships, that enable us to listen and learn, cultivate values, design with rather than for, collaborate across disciplines, measure impact and share insights.

As design educators, we need to work more effectively to cultivate understandings of what our students know, do not know, and then encourage learning experiences in fields and disciplines related to design to help them expand and extend their abilities to construct, rather than merely perform, new knowledge. We need to be calculated risk-takers, and realize that the pilot projects completed within a given term or semester may have longer trajectories, both in helping to expand the way emerging designers choose to practice in the future, and to increasing the diversity of the types of projects they engage with and the topics they investigate. The people-centered design and research skills imparted in the various methodologies outlined in the essays, interviews and case studies in Developing Citizen Designers comprise the spectrum of understanding and knowledge needed by future designers, regardless of how, when and whether they define themselves as citizen designers.